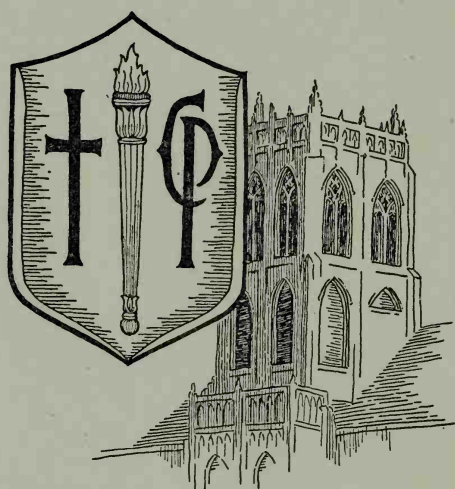


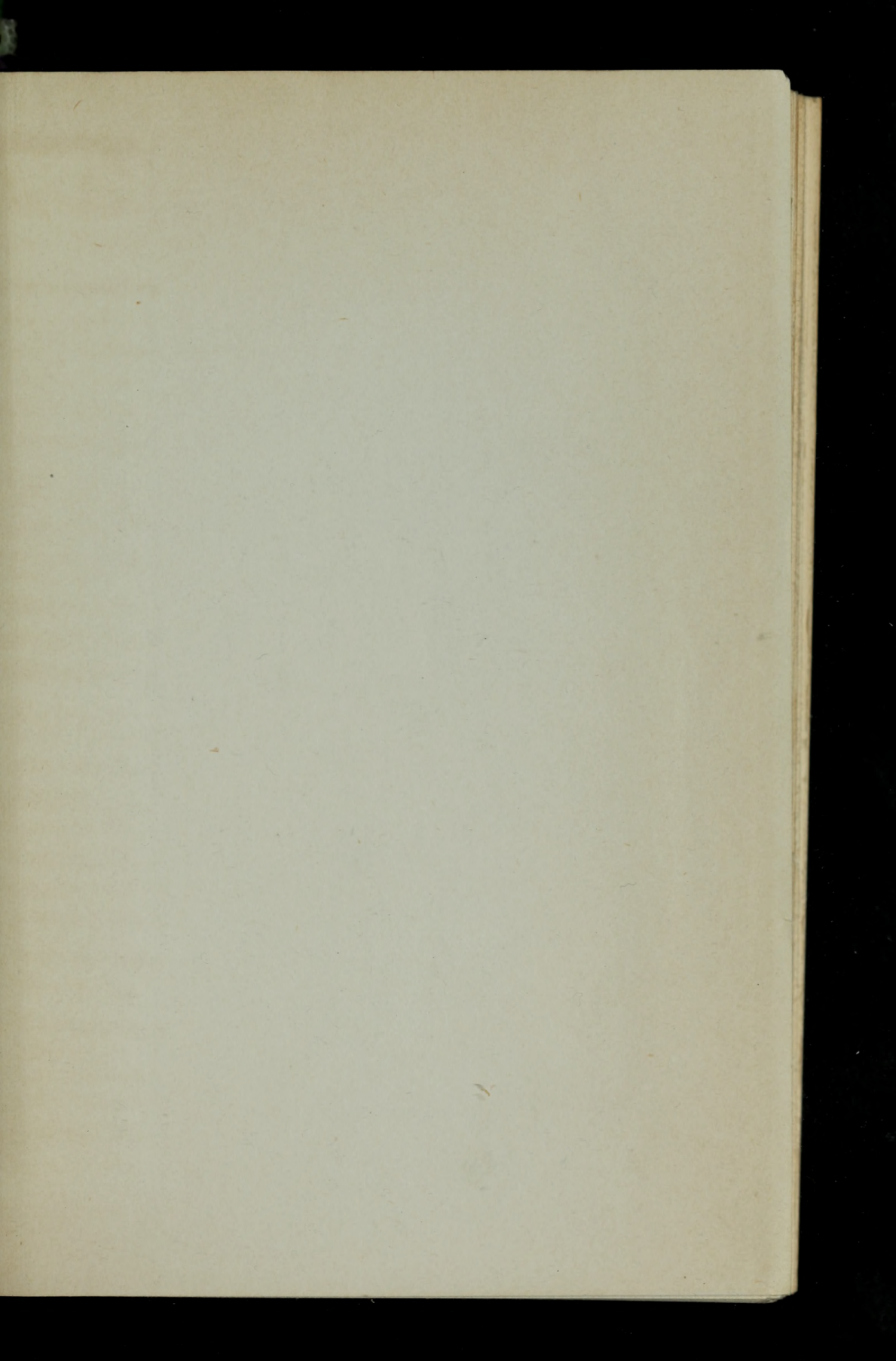
# THE SURVIVORS

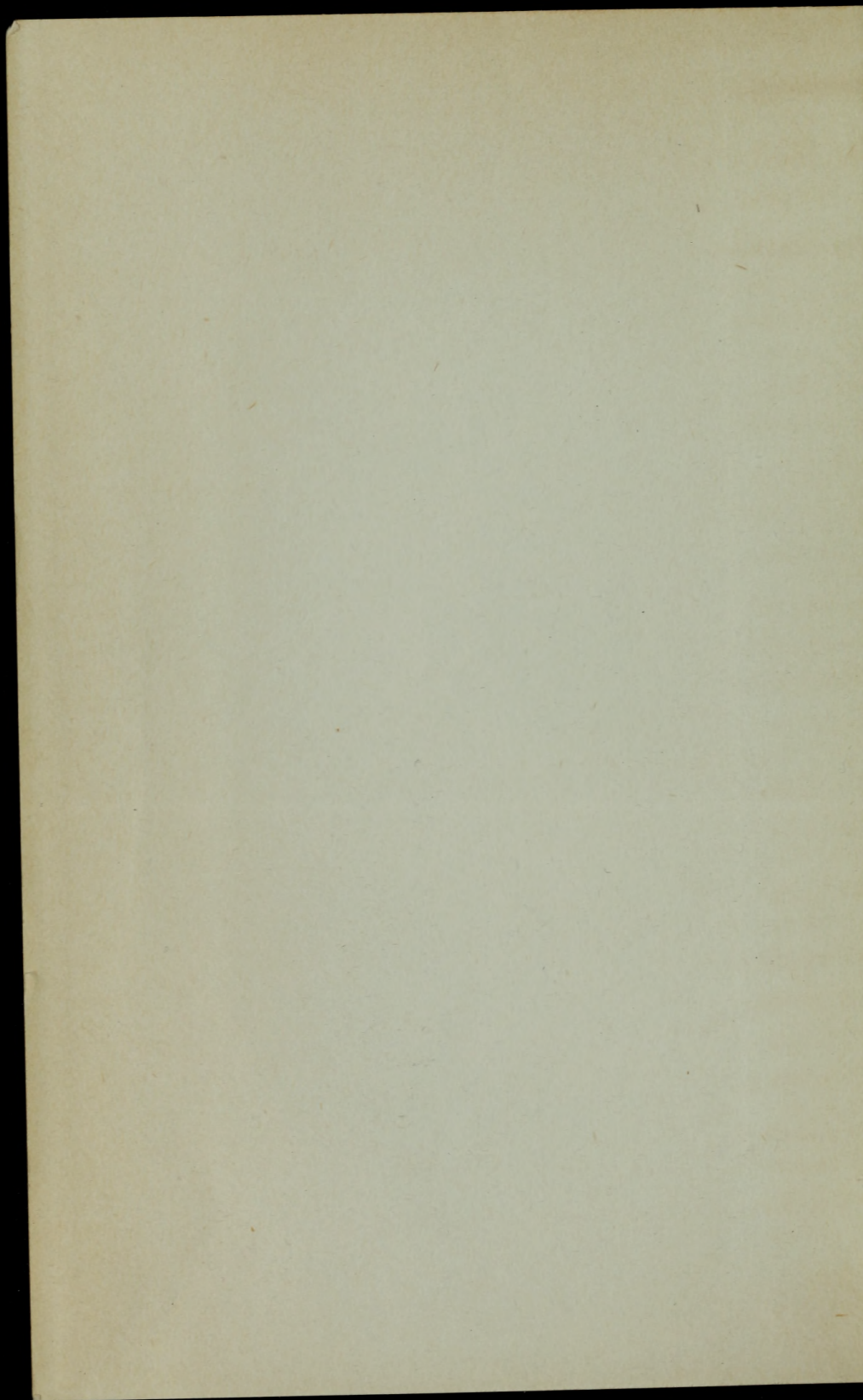
RONALD MCKIE

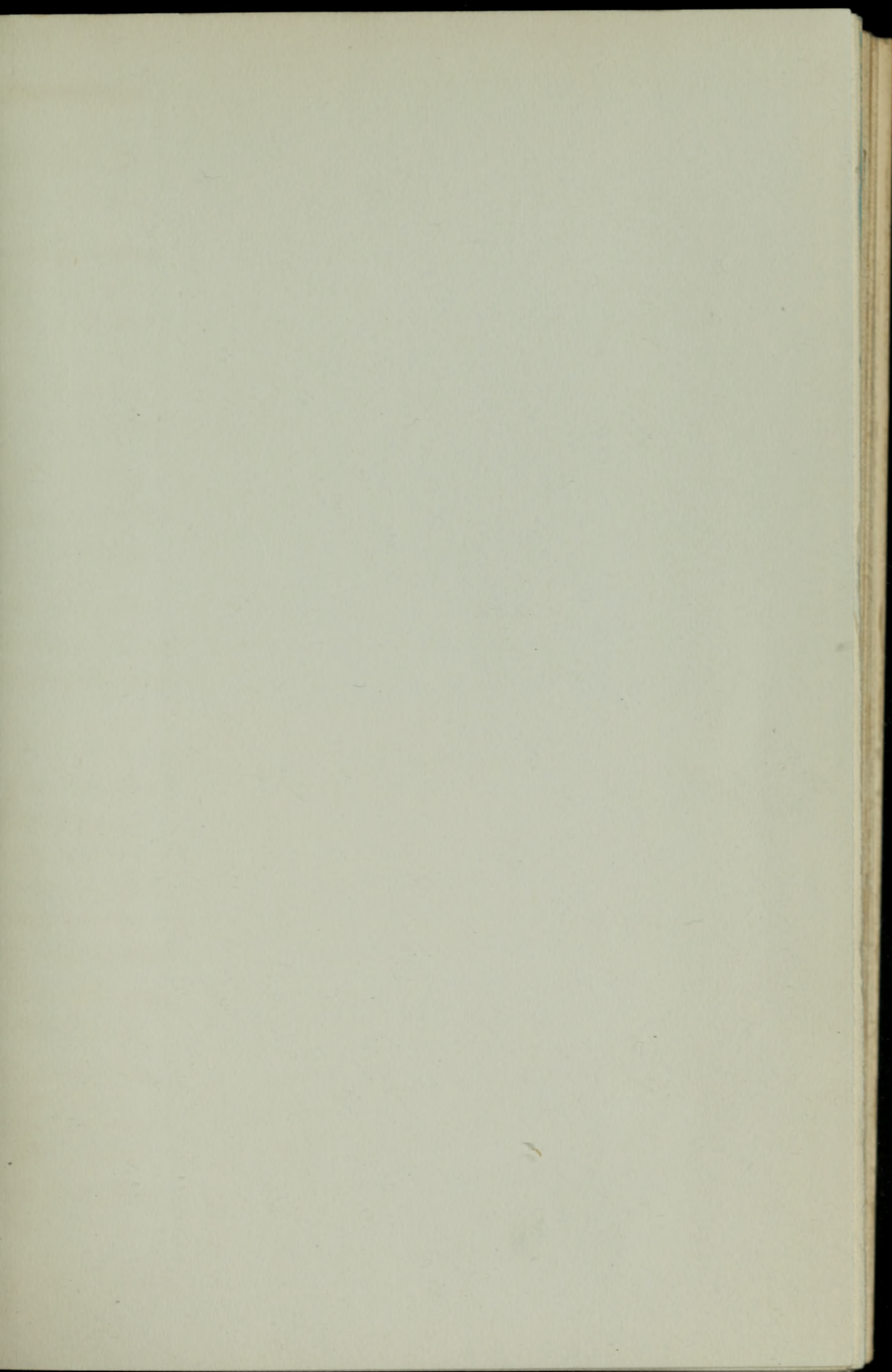


COLLEGE  
OF THE PACIFIC

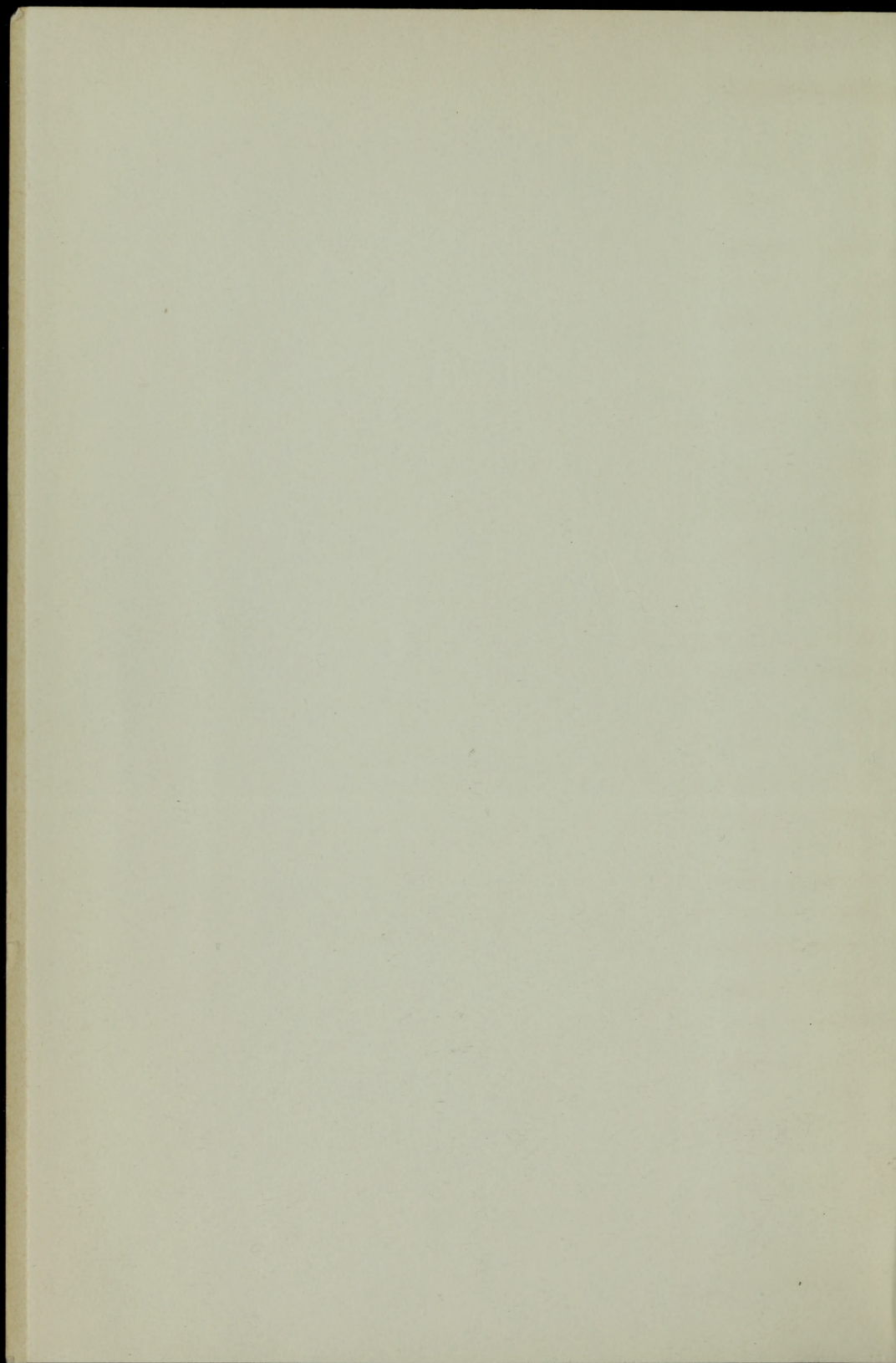


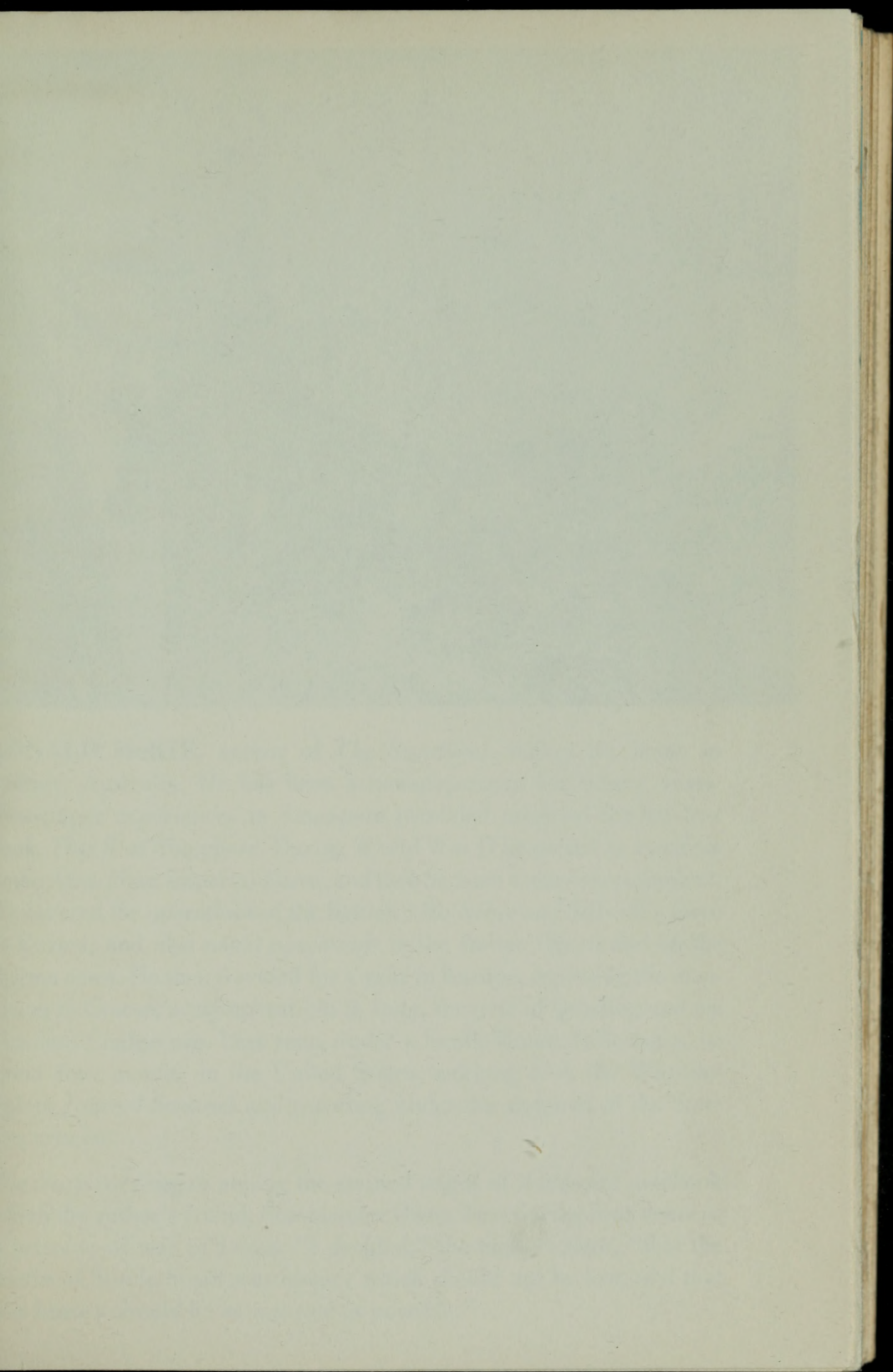


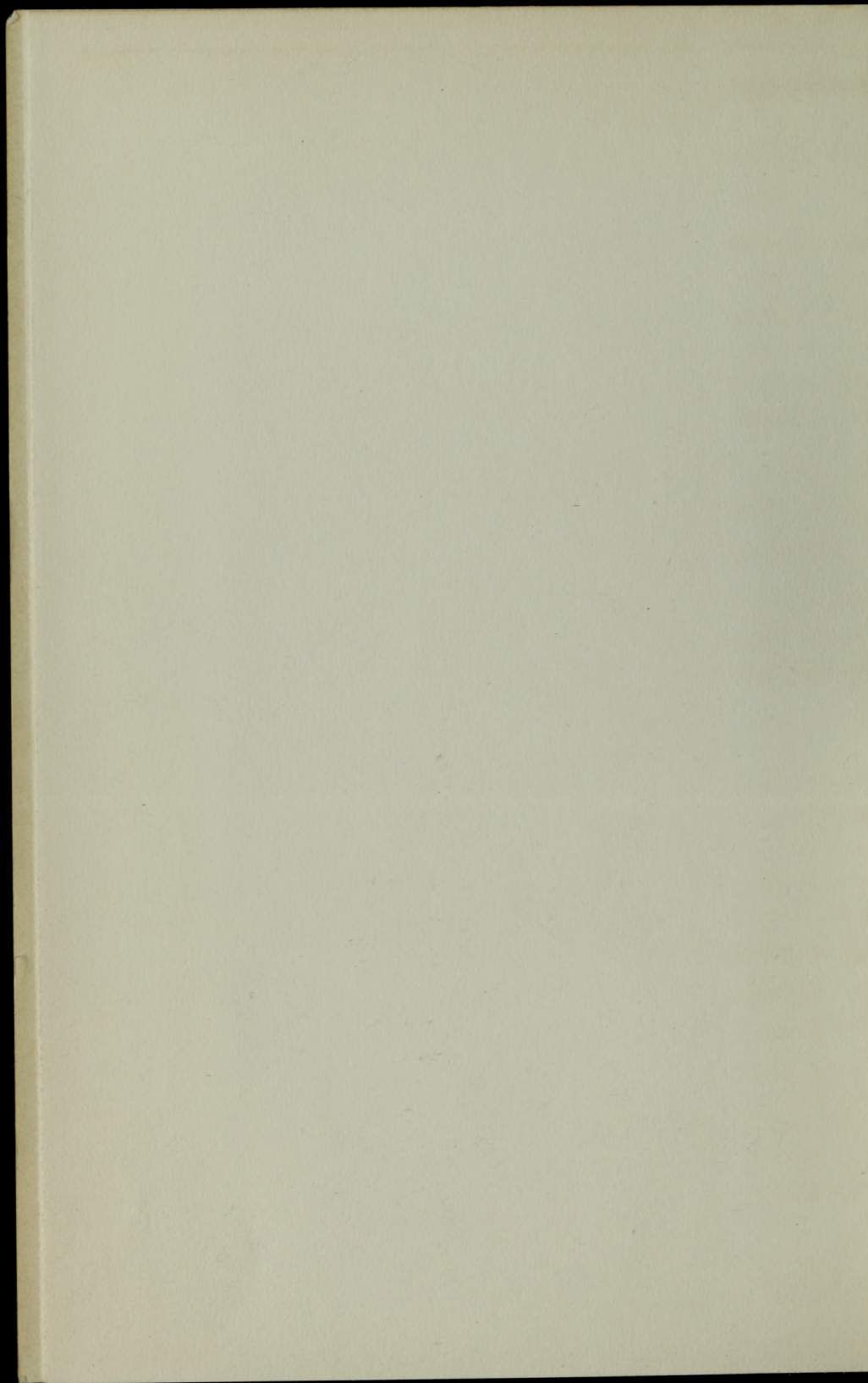










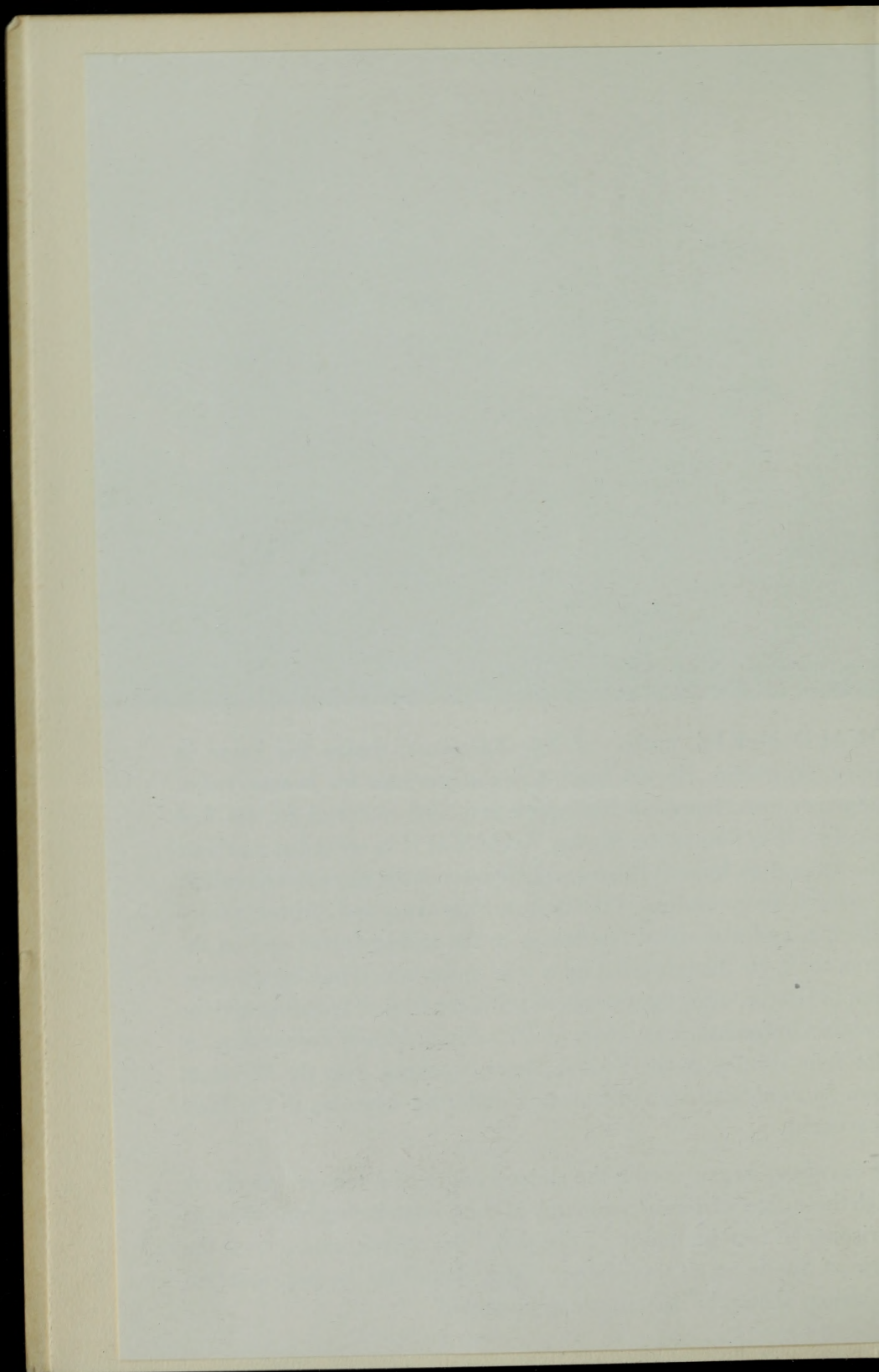






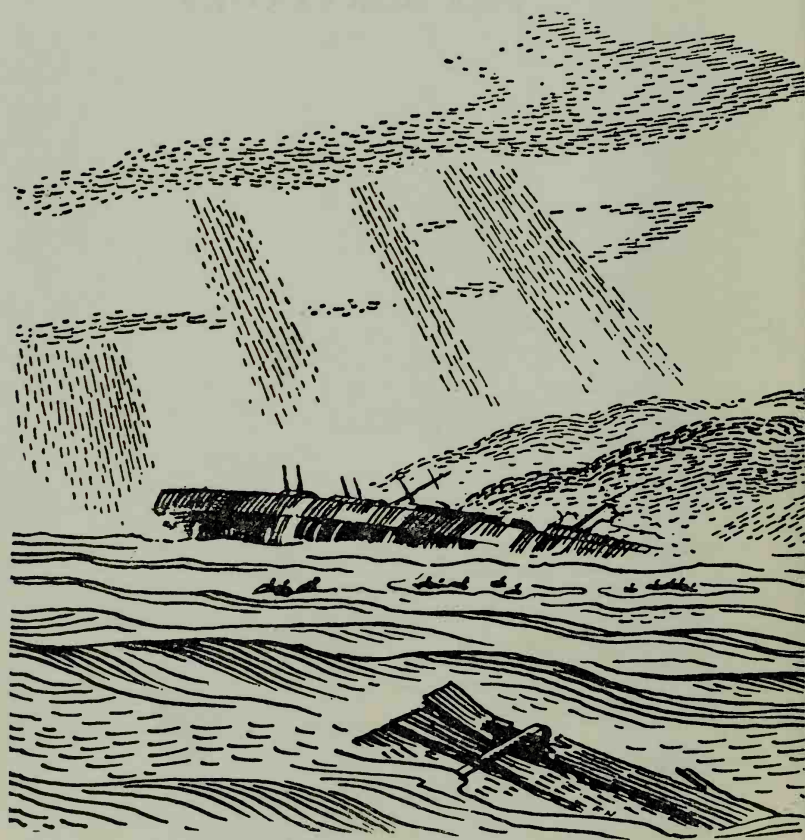
**RONALD McKIE**, author of *The Survivors*, makes his home in Sydney, Australia. He has been a newspaperman for twenty years. Newspaper experiences in Singapore provided material for his first book, *This Was Singapore*. During World War II he served as a private in the Australian Imperial Force, and then became a war correspondent. He covered the operations of the British 14th Army and Stilwell's force in Burma, and also naval operations in the Indian Ocean and on the Burma coast. He then traveled for a year in Europe, reporting the revolution in Greece, army operations in Italy, the trial of Quisling and the Potsdam Conference. Last year, under a Smith-Mundt Fellowship, he spent four months in the United States, working with the Winston-Salem *Journal-Sentinel* and traveling under the auspices of the State Department.

*The Survivors* began among the stained pages of a ten-cent notebook which the author's friend, Commander Owen, kept during four years as a prisoner of war in Japan. "I decided," the author states, "that the Battle of Sunda Strait was history which should not be lost, and that this history should be as accurate as possible."





THE SURVIVORS

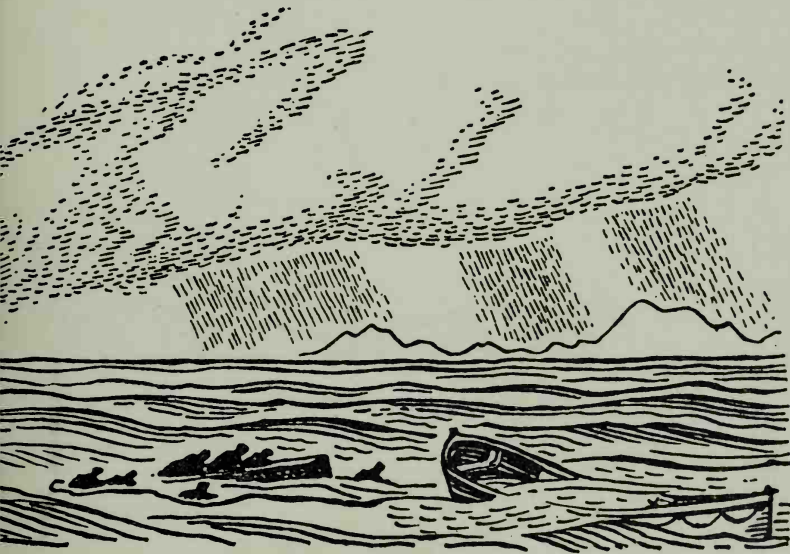


College of the Pacific  
Stockton, Calif.

# The SURVIVORS

by RONALD McKIE

Drawings by  
FRANK NORTON



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## DEDICATION

FOR NANCY WALLER, brave wife of a gallant  
Captain, and for the mothers and wives of  
all those men who fought and died in  
H.M.A.S. *Perth* and U.S.S. *Houston* in the  
Battle of Sunda Strait.



## *ACKNOWLEDGMENT*

This book—written with the invaluable co-operation and technical assistance of Commander (S) P. O. L. Owen, R.A.N. (Retired)—began among the stained pages of a ten-cent notebook which Owen kept during four years as a prisoner of war in Japan, and in which he recorded the genesis of this story.

## A TRIBUTE

Hector Macdonald Laws Waller will always remain in my mind as one of the very finest types of Australian naval officer. Full of good cheer, with a great sense of humor, undefeated and always burning to get at the enemy, he kept the old ships of his flotilla—the *Stuart*, *Vampire*, *Vendetta*, *Voyager*, *Waterhen*—hard at it always. He was greatly loved and admired by everyone, and his loss in H.M.A.S. *Perth* in the Java Sea in March 1942 was a heavy deprivation for the young Navy of Australia.

—From *A Sailor's Odyssey*, with the personal permission of Admiral of the Fleet, Viscount Cunningham of Hyndhope.

## *THE MEN WHO TOLD THIS STORY*

*1942*

Paymaster Lieutenant-Commander

P. O. L. Owen

Leading Seaman H. K. Gosden

Paymaster Sub-Lieutenant

G. R. Campbell

Torpedo Gunner L. C. Smith

Engineer Lieutenant F. O. Gillan

Surgeon Lieutenant S. E. L. Stening

Petty Officer Steward W. E. Davis

Schoolmaster N. E. Lyons

Lieutenant L. T. Burgess

Able Seaman J. Woods

*1952*

Insurance representative

Rubber worker

Store superintendent

Electrical inspector

Marine engineer

Children's specialist

Lift-driver

R.A.N. Instructor Lieutenant-Commander

Club secretary

Builder



## FOREWORD

AS Commodore Commanding China Force at Tanjong Priok, I found it my duty to order H.M.A.S. *Perth* to sail on what was to be her last voyage. From information available we thought she would make the Sunda Straits unopposed, but two brief enemy reports received by signal indicated that she had encountered enemy ships.

Little was known of the subsequent happenings until after the war, but now we have, for the first time, the full story of the Battle of Sunda Strait. This account tells how H.M.A.S. *Perth* went down fighting to the end, taking with her Hec Waller and so many of his brave shipmates. In it we read, in non-technical language, of the experiences of selected officers and ratings and see through their eyes the tremendous events of that night and the tragic days that followed.

It is a story that should be read by all.

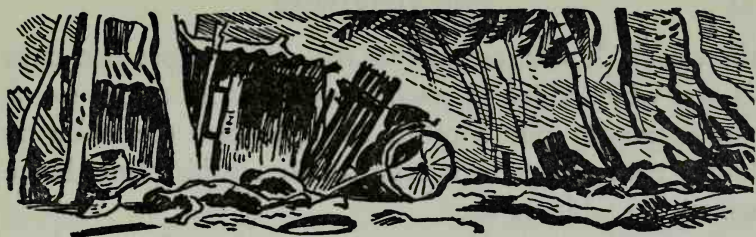
VICE-ADMIRAL SIR JOHN COLLINS  
*First Naval Member and Chief  
of the Naval Staff.*

\_\_\_\_\_





THE SURVIVORS



## Introduction

**B**Y SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 1942—83 DAYS after Pearl Harbor had become a dictionary term for war without warning—Japan had grabbed an empire. She already held that milky way of islands which jostle for place among the crowded seas between the mainland of Asia and the western edge of the Pacific. She was still reaching out—west, south, east—to complete her original master plan of conquest, her occupation of all territory from the Kuriles down through the Admiraltys to New Guinea and west through the Indies to Burma.

Singapore had surrendered. The Japanese were in Manila and were nearing Rangoon. Bombs had smashed Darwin and were falling on Port Moresby, and invasion fleets were moving on New Guinea. Java, last of the Indies, was still free of Japanese, but Java was about to die.

But February 28, 1942, was not an exceptional day in those months which established new patterns in Asia and set in motion new forces which will change the history of

the world. It was just another day among 2,000-odd days of war which killed 22,000,000 people, replaced one set of power politics with another, and gave men the means of killing man and perhaps even destroying his planet home among the whirling stars.

Future historians—if there are any to record our antics—will show no inclination to get excited about that Saturday. They may glance at it casually as it lies among the dates which litter the past, but it won't stir in their minds the bright-dark memory of bomber fleets against the moon, one dictator strung by his heels from a red girder beside a sun-drenched plaza, another raving among the ruins of his bombed-out chancellery, a cloud shaped like a mushroom lifting high and terrifying into the stratosphere.

And yet February 28, 1942, was important to 1,746 men—682 in the Australian light cruiser *Perth* and 1,064 in the United States heavy cruiser *Houston*—important because to them that Saturday did not mean playing with their children or strolling with their girls or watching a cricket match or a baseball game, but meeting death in fiery turrets or flooded engine rooms, or trying not to die under fuel oil like a black and slippery blanket on a black-warm sea.

But before that day—just a few days before—certain things, certain events, following and crowding in on each other, helped build up the pattern of death or survival for those men.

On February 26, 1942, when the Japanese invasion convoys were moving on Java, an Allied Striking Force was already in the Java Sea, that long narrow strip of water between Java and Borneo. This Striking Force, in command of the Dutchman, Rear-Admiral Karel Doorman,

consisted of the Dutch light cruisers *De Ruyter* (flagship) and *Java*, the American heavy cruiser *Houston*, the British heavy cruiser *Exeter*, the Australian light cruiser *Perth*, the Dutch destroyers *Witte de With* and *Kortenaer*, the British destroyers *Jupiter*, *Electra* and *Encounter*, and the American destroyers *Edwards*, *Alden*, *Ford* and *Paul Jones*.

The Americans called *Houston* the "Gallopig Ghost of the Java Sea" because the Japanese had claimed her sunk so often since Pearl Harbor. She was still very much afloat, though her stern triple eight-inch gun turret was out of action from a direct hit by a Japanese bomb earlier in the Pacific war. Britain's *Exeter* was one of the ship heroes of the famous battle with Hitler's pocket battleship *Graf Spee* off the River Plate. Australia's *Perth* had already fought in the Battle of Matapan in the Mediterranean.

A 14-ship force like this, with air cover and experienced leadership, would have been formidable. Unfortunately, it had neither. The Dutch admiral was as gallant as any in Netherlands naval history, but his battle experience was limited, and he should never have been in command. His was a political and a rank appointment made in haste at a time of chaos and collapse. But on top of the leadership blunder were other grave problems. The Striking Force had never worked together, it had no common signaling plan, many signals did not reach the other ships from the flagship in correct order, and, worst of all, the Force had no air reconnaissance. When the Allied ships went to sea there was still a possibility that the United States aircraft tender *Langley*, packed with planes, would reach Java in time. But Japanese bombers smashed this hope when they got the *Langley* south of Java on February twenty-seventh,



and from that moment the Striking Force was blind against a powerful offensive enemy with complete command of the air.

The Battle of the Java Sea, which decided the fate of Java, was two actions—afternoon and night—spread over more than seven hours. The daylight action began in the late afternoon of February twenty-seventh when the Allied Striking Force, heading north to intercept a Japanese invasion convoy near Bawean Island, 100 miles north of the Java port of Surabaya, ran into 16 Japanese warships. These were the heavy cruisers *Nachi* and *Haguro* (Rear-Admiral Takagi), of the 5th Cruiser Division, the light cruiser *Jintsu* (Rear-Admiral Tanaka) with the 2nd Destroyer Flotilla of six ships, and the light cruiser *Naka* with the 4th Destroyer Flotilla of six ships.

The Battle of the Java Sea began at 4:16 P.M. when the Japanese heavies, *Nachi* and *Haguro*, opened with their twenty 8-inch guns at seventeen miles, and the Allied heavies, *Exeter* and *Houston*, replied with their twelve 8-inch guns. . . . The battle ended at 11:30 P.M. when the Japanese torpedoed both Dutch cruisers, *De Ruyter* and *Java*.

The Japanese had one destroyer badly damaged, and hits on other ships, including the cruisers. But the Allied Striking Force was broken and scattered. The Dutch lost their two cruisers and the destroyer *Kortenaer*. The British lost the *Electra* and *Jupiter* and had *Exeter* badly damaged. The only Allied cruisers left after the battle and capable of fighting were *Perth* and *Houston*, but because they lacked destroyer support—the four American destroyers had withdrawn during the battle to Surabaya because they had fired all their torpedoes and were almost out of



fuel—the two cruisers broke off action and made for Tanjong Priok, the port of Batavia.

You can, of course, read the detailed story of that action, and the final Battle of Sunda Strait,\* or follow on maps the almost minute-to-minute movement of the ships which took part. You know their speeds, the ranges of their guns, the fall of their shells. You can see the smoke screens, heavy and obscene, hear the guns pumping metal across the sky, watch the torpedo tracks comb the cruiser line. You can note with professional admiration the way the Japanese used flares dropped from aircraft to mark every change of course the Allied Striking Force made at night. You can put your fingers on the blunders of the Dutch admiral—the way he kept his ships in line ahead and presented broadside targets to the enemy, his early failure to close the range and bring his light cruisers into action, the fact that he nearly ran his fleet aground on the Java coast. You can see also that the Dutch admiral, without one plane and against Admiral Takagi with constant air reconnaissance, fought courageously with his eyes bandaged. Better leadership, however, and more aggressive tactics might—though even might is a doubtful word—have turned the Battle of the Java Sea into an Allied victory which would have left the Japanese convoy north of Surabaya wide open to attack. Instead, the battle was a defeat which laid the long island of Java open to unopposed invasion. All this, of course, is merely being wise after the event—wise from the safety of a desk in peacetime, long after this battle was fought in those too-little-too-late days that followed Pearl Harbor.

\* See Appendices for official reports of those actions, and for an article written on the part U.S.S. *Houston* played.

But when you have read the story of this battle, and the Battle of Sunda Strait, what do the official reports, or the maps as precise as a surgeon's plan, really tell you about battle at sea? Little more, unless you can read between the lines, than the antiseptic facts of action—poor cold dehumanized ceremonial of men dying and men surviving. You know that ships were straddled and hit, but nothing of what men thought in those exploding moments. You know that men went down into the sea, but nothing of the cold fear that gripped them. The statistics tell you that many died and few were saved, but you don't know why, among men with equal chances, some died and some decided to die but lived.

In war, when machines take precedence over men and a ship is more important than the hundreds who serve her, the answers to questions like these are generally fragmentary, so that the picture you get then is distorted or only partly filled in. This is only natural, for so much happens, and there is so little time between those happenings, that it is almost impossible to get any accurate, behind-the-scenes perspective of the mad circus of war. You watch from the ringside, but when you file toward the exits through the smells of dust and sawdust you know no more about the clown or the fat lady in spangles or the performing elephant than when you paid your money and took your seat.

Only rarely does a Remarque or a Barbusse tell the truth about war and men at war, for war is so much camouflage and courage and emotion and faked communiqués and waiting and boredom and sham and unseen heroism and forgivable cowardice and words chasing themselves in their

millions that men—the human animals who matter—inevitably get lost among the clutter of battles and the long waits in between. Here and there individuals emerge who win a Victoria Cross or a Congressional Medal of Honor, who shoot down fifty planes or delouse a land mine in a dark hole as a clock ticks; but even then their real personalities remain shadowy outside the spotlight of their immediate deeds.

For these reasons, or some of them, this book concentrates not on planning or strategy, but on men—a few ordinary men. There is nothing exceptional about any of them. They are men you know or could know, like the man next door. They are mostly civilians turned sailors because they preferred their own individualistic way of life, with all its imperfections, to the life others planned to impose on them.

This book is not the history of a battle, though a battle is fought, or the history of a ship, though a ship dies, but an authentic record, checked and counterchecked, of the most important hours in the lives of ten men—ten Australians among the 200-odd who lived to remember not only how they fought in *Perth's* last battle of Sunda Strait, but how men died, survived, feared, prayed, cursed and sang during that battle and afterward. This, however, is not a "war" book in the ordinary sense. True, it is about war, but war is merely a background—a curtain of night and day against which ten men stand and talk and behave under threat of extinction. Inevitably, of course, there are gaps in the stories they tell, for human memory at best is a frail thing. But all have tried to recall, as accurately as possible, what happened to them and what they felt during their battle at night and struggle by day.

Yet the ten men have no monopoly of this story. They represent the 200-odd survivors of the 682-man crew of H.M.A.S. *Perth*, but any other group among those survivors could tell an equally heroic and tragic story. The ten who made this story possible are a symbol then of all those who died and all those who lived to remember the blood on the dark waters of Sunda. They are in themselves an explanation of what this book is all about: human behavior, human endurance, the courage of ordinary men that will burn on to warm their children and their children's children.

It is time that the Battle of Sunda Strait was better known. *Perth* and *Houston* disappeared that Saturday night, February 28, 1942 (or early on Sunday morning to be precise), and only at the end of the Pacific war were survivors from those ships able to tell what had happened. Then, of course, battles were, temporarily, out of fashion, and so, long before it could be remembered, the Battle of Sunda Strait was already forgotten. Yet this battle, fought twenty-four hours after defeat in the Java Sea, was a tradition-making epic in the long story of naval warfare. *Perth* and *Houston*—*Houston* damaged and both short of fuel and ammunition—fought their hopelessly gallant actions for an hour and a half before at least twenty Japanese warships overwhelmed them. Even as torpedoes ripped their sides and shells came aboard like confetti, the Allied cruisers, their magazines empty, were still firing—firing practice “bricks,” the only ammunition they had left—as the encircling enemy closed in to kill in the cruel white glare of searchlights.

No warships ever fought so magnificently against such impossible odds, for the Western Attack Force which Rear

Admiral Kurita brought down from Banka Island to Bantam Bay, just east of Sunda Strait, was a modern naval armada. It consisted of fifty-six transports, the light cruiser *Sendai* with fourteen destroyers, the light cruisers *Natori* and *Yura* with nine destroyers, a seaplane carrier, a seaplane tender, and torpedo boats, plus Kurita's Western Covering Group—the aircraft carrier *Ryujo* with destroyer support, and four heavy cruisers, including the *Mogami* (Captain, later Rear Admiral Soji) and the *Mikuma*.

*Perth* and *Houston* ran into most of these warships—the Japs were covering their transports already anchored and unloading troops inside Bantam Bay—near the entrance to Sunda Strait, and in the battle that followed, lasting more than ninety minutes, they damaged at least six destroyers, damaged the heavy cruiser *Mikuma*, and sank the seaplane carrier and four transports, including one of the headquarters ships carrying the Japanese land commander of the West Java invasion, General Imamura (Commander, 16th Army), who spent twenty minutes in the sea clinging to wreckage before he got ashore. Japanese torpedoes—Jap warships fired nearly ninety during the action—also sank or damaged several other transports.

After the battle the Japanese still believed that a battleship had escaped.

No warships ever fought more gallantly than *Perth* and *Houston*, but only because of the ordinary men who served them—gunners, cooks, navigators, stokers, and the rest of those heroic crews.

That is why the individual and collective story of the ten men is part of our history—history as it actually happened told by the men who made it.





Saturday: 2:30 P. M.

TANJONG PRIOK, PORT OF BATAVIA, SMELLED of burning oil and stale bomb bursts and smoldering building. It also smelled of defeat—and in the defeat was treachery.

The oil tanks, bombed three days before, still rolled sullen smoke across the harbor where the blackened carcasses of ships lifted their heads and shoulders above the water. The wharves were almost deserted, the loading cranes—those not already twisted scrap—were still. The godowns, packed with goods worth millions—machinery, motors, crated aircraft, shells, torpedoes, food, clothes, whisky, cigarettes—waited open for capture, though parties of Royal Air Force men and Dutch started to destroy some of the aircraft before the invasion began.

Defeat was everywhere. It was something you could almost reach out and touch. It covered everything like the smoke from the splintered tanks half a mile away. That

day, before the Japanese landed on Java, the island was already lost, for the Dutch had spent their ships and submarines and obsolete planes in brave attempts to stop the Japanese advance, and they had failed and Java fell. But in that failure they helped save Australia—the base from which reconquest of the Japanese empire began.

At 2:30 P.M. on February 28, 1942—invasion eve and only five days before the Japanese took Batavia—*Perth* and *Houston* came in from the Java Sea—came in from defeat to the smell of defeat—and stayed five hours. Then they went on, westward to the thunder of guns and their fighting end.

*Perth's* crew that day were bleary-eyed, with dirt and stubble on their gray drawn faces and dirt and oil on their uniforms. None of the men had closed their eyes for thirty hours; many had not slept for three days or more; none had changed his clothes. They watched wearily as the cruiser berthed in No. 2 Harbor, the sweat leaking from under their caps and edging down their faces like tears. But those Australians were too tired even to curse the sticky heat of this 300-year-old port where—strange twist of history—Captain James Cook had repaired his tiny *Endeavour* 172 years before when returning from his discovery of the eastern seaboard of their country.

Few talked of the action just over, or of the war; but war was in their minds like suspicion, and suspicion was everywhere. Most of the younger men—and some were not much more than boys—were optimistic about the future. They had survived a battle, they would get away. That was the reasoning of youth. But the older men were not so sure. They looked round, and, remembering the

wreckage and burning ships at Surabaya and the exploding ships at sea, knew that Java was crumbling. They knew war, and war had taught them geography, and they were worried, though they kept their feelings to themselves. They were in a landlocked sea, and the ships and planes of Japan now had command of that sea. They knew they had to get out, and that Sunda Strait, the closest escape route to the Indian Ocean, was a narrow laneway of water leading to freedom, or a trap—a submarine commander's dream.

Three days back, before *Perth* moved to Surabaya and action in the Java Sea, Tanjong Priok was under constant air attack so heavy that *Perth* even used her 6-inch guns at extreme elevation to keep the Kamichi bombers high. That was the day the oil tanks went up and the Japs got a direct hit on the British oil tanker *War Sirdar* in midstream and a near-miss that landed like Nelson's Column just clear of H.M.A.S. *Hobart's* bow. But now the port was strangely quiet and ominously still. There were no cries of native boatmen or chant from working gangs along the wharves. The silence wasn't natural to men whose ears were still jarred with the salvos of 6-inch guns and the express-train rush and crash of Japanese shells.

With the Japanese closing in there was not much time, and every man felt this sense of urgency and worked all afternoon to get *Perth* ready for sea. *Perth* fueled, but could get only 300 tons, which brought her total oil supply to only 50 per cent capacity. It wasn't enough, but the Japanese bombers had seen to that, and other ships had to get their ration. *Perth's* officers and men, scrounging for ammunition, found some for her 4-inch guns, but none for



her main 6-inch armament, so that when the cruiser sailed to fight her last battle she had only twenty rounds for each of her six 6-inch guns; and *Houston*, which had fired more than six hundred shells in the Java Sea, had less than fifty rounds a gun.

From the crowded godowns, their doors smashed or sagging from bomb and gun blast, working parties carried cases of tinned butter and milk, whisky and cigarettes destined for already captured Singapore. Far better that a fighting unit should have some of these supplies than the coming Japanese. There were few men in *Perth* who smoked that did not bring aboard cartons or cases of Gold-flake or Players, and the bottles of Scotch which found their way into *Perth's* lockers would have made any member of Alcoholics Anonymous envious. While searching for food, sailors found typewriters and sewing machines in hundreds, aircraft parts and car chassis, bolts of silk and boxes of bathing costumes. They found also two complete airfield fire-fighting units and took them aboard, and twenty-four small life rafts made of wood and copper tanks which they stacked on the quarter-deck. These rafts were standard equipment for the pilgrim ships which each year took thousands of Indonesian Moslems to Mecca, but the rafts were to be ready for no more followers of the Prophet wrecked while making the famous Haj. They were to do greater service, for the decision to bring them aboard saved many lives in Sunda Strait in the next dozen hours. Yet strangely, brutally, luck or providence, or whatever you like to call the presiding genius, decided that the man who ordered those rafts aboard, Commander William Martin, was himself to die in the sea.

*Perth* had fueled, but the oil hoses were still connected, when sirens wailed and the few native laborers scattered for cover. *Perth's* guns hammered, then stopped, and the gunners grinned. The plane was the *Houston's*—a partly damaged one she had left behind before moving to Surabaya and battle. Then a Dutch reconnaissance went over, and behind it was another plane . . . dirty brown . . . coming in fast and low . . . a Zero float. . . . The guns opened up together, but the Zero slid away, and the gun crews cursed.

*Perth* was due to sail at 6 P.M., but delay in reassembling the native labor and disconnecting the fuel lines put sailing time back to 7 P.M. And that hour, which the Zero took from them, may have meant the difference between escape and destruction, between life and death for nearly two men in every three of that gallant company.

But something else happened that afternoon which not one *Perth* survivor has forgotten. They talked about it in the mines of northern Japan, in Changi jail at Singapore, on the Burma railway, in the teak forests of Siam. They still talk about it when they meet, still shake their heads, for sailor superstition is strong and almost a religion of its own.

In *Perth* was a cat—a small black undistinguished cat not much older than a kitten. A girl had given him to one of *Perth's* crew after a party on New Year's Eve, 1941, in Sydney. The sailor brought him aboard, where one of the first things he did was to upset a pot of red lead and christen himself to his own discomfort and the satisfaction of all. At this time *Perth* had a commander who disliked cats, and particularly disliked cats on His Majesty's Australian ships.

So during daily rounds—that formal and terrifying walk-about commanders make—the sailors hid Red Lead in lockers, behind steam pipes, and even in kit bags. But keeping the cat quiet was not always easy, and one day a sailor had a brain wave. He decided that if Captain Waller approved their cat, then no commander, however prejudiced, would dare object, and Red Lead would be free to walk even the sacred quarter-deck without fear of being kicked overboard. But the sailor didn't ask the captain's permission to keep Red Lead. He was much more subtle than that. He waited. And one day, when the word went through the grapevine that the captain was on the bridge, the sailor took the cat up topside and strategically released him. Red Lead did the rest. He seemed to know exactly what was expected of him. He wandered round the bridge, stropped himself against Waller's legs, and Waller picked him up and played with him. From that moment *Perth* would not have been *Perth* without her mascot. From that moment, too, Red Lead, with freedom from engine room to turret, never attempted to leave the ship, but . . . That Saturday at Tanjong Priok Red Lead tried to escape. Three times he went down the gangway to the wharf and made for the godowns, and three times sailors chased him and brought him back. The news soon got about, and men shook their heads and began to remember other things, significant things, and with the superstition of men of the sea to add them up. In the wardroom, when *Perth* was at Tanjong Priok three days before, and when the guns were hammering, the portrait of Marina, Duchess of Kent, who had renamed *Perth* when she was H.M.S. *Amphion* back in June 1939, had fallen from the bulkhead. The men remembered

also that *Perth* had been recalled three times to Fremantle before sailing for the Indies and that—though only a few knew this—Captain Waller had been due to sail at 11:30 P.M. on February 13, 1942, from Fremantle and had deliberately not sailed until after midnight. They remembered, too, that *Perth* had two chaplains on board, and that perhaps was the worst sea omen of them all. One chaplain was bad enough, but two—that was lethal! They remembered these things that day and talked about them as they went about their jobs or played cards or had their meals, for sailors are like a large family in a small house with no front garden and no back yard, and around them is the enigmatic sea.

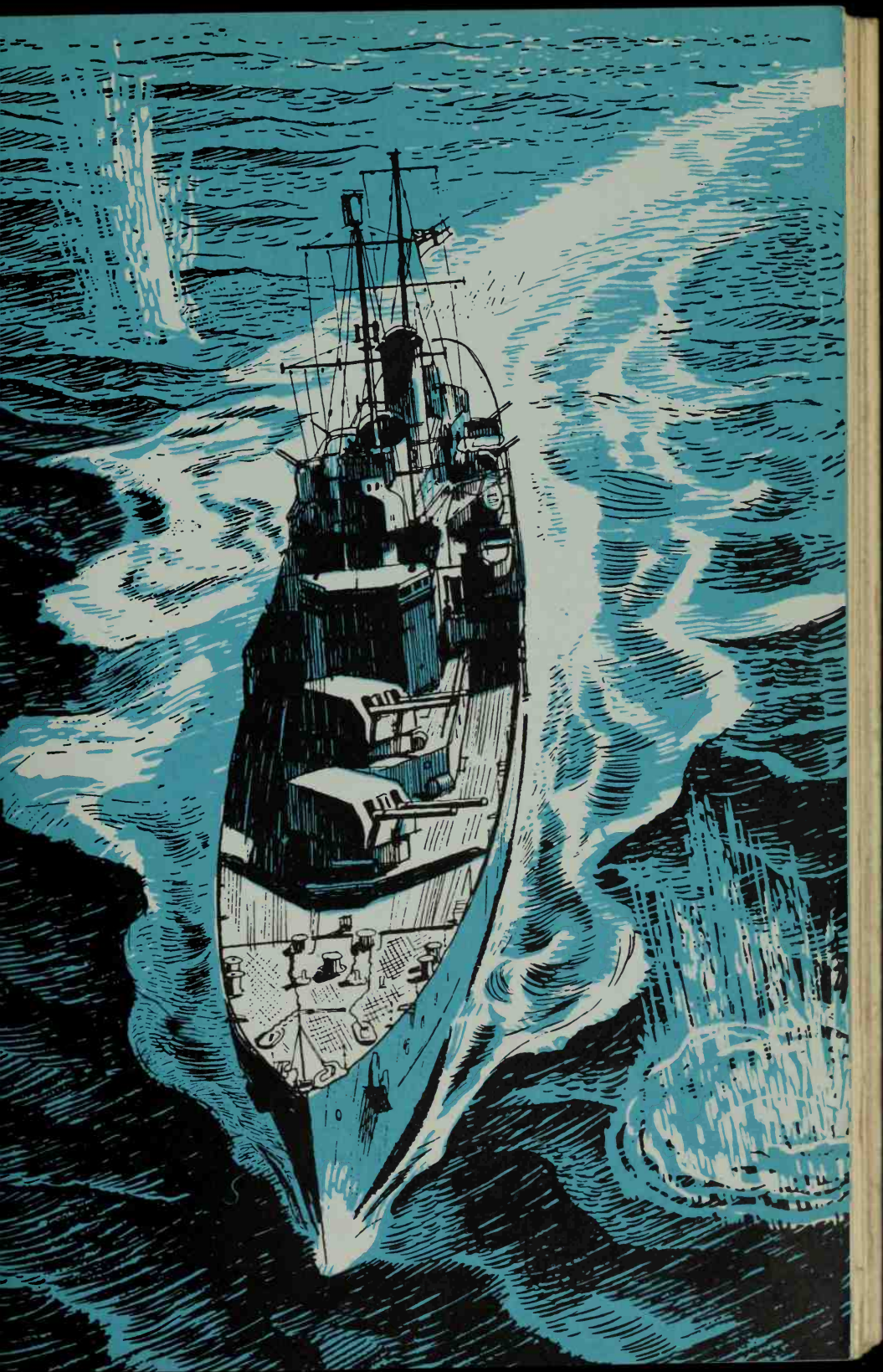
And then in the dusk at 7 P.M. *Perth* and *Houston* sailed, and an hour later, when free of the mine fields covering the port and heading west, every man in the Australian cruiser stilled.

“This is the captain speaking.”

In those seconds as the men waited, the dull pulse beat of the engines was the only sound. Then, again, Captain Waller’s voice came over the intercommunication system to every part of the ship. . . .

“We are sailing for Sunda Strait bound for Tjilatjap [on Java’s south coast] and will shortly close up to the first degree of readiness relaxed. Dutch air reconnaissance reports that Sunda Strait is free of enemy shipping. But I have a report that a large enemy convoy is about fifty miles northeast of Batavia moving east. I do not expect, however, to meet enemy forces.”







# H·M·A·S· P·E·R·T·H

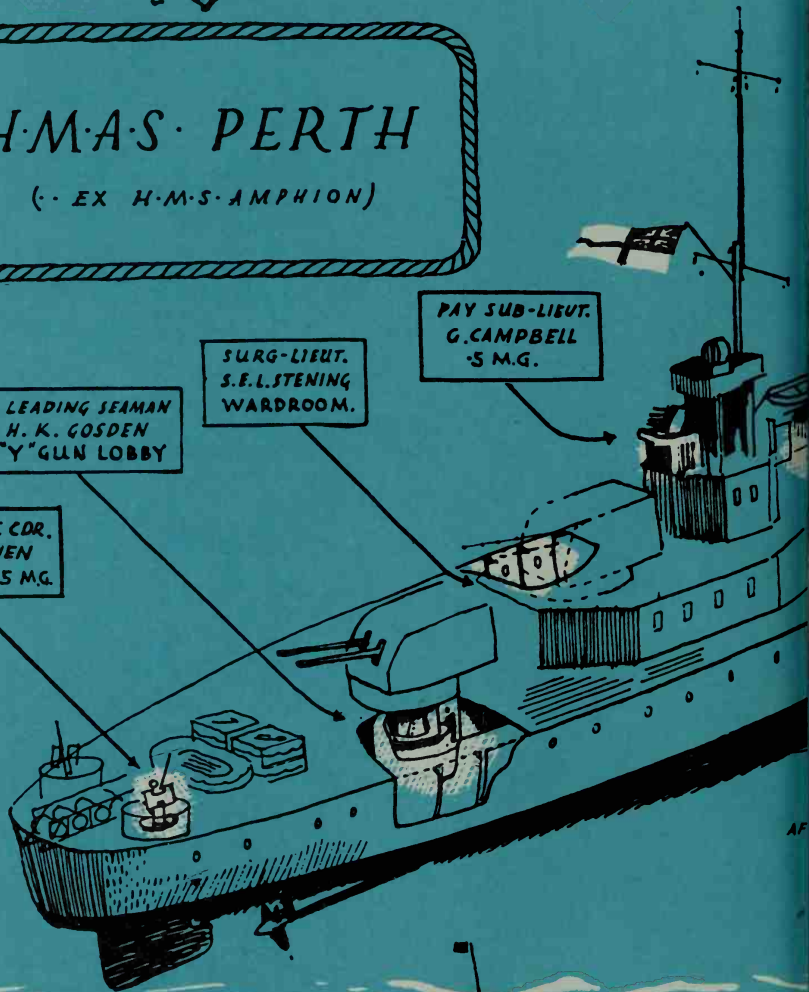
(· · E·X· H·M·S· A·M·P·H·I·O·N)

LEADING SEAMAN  
H. K. GOSDEN  
"Y" GUN LOBBY

PAY. LIEUT. CDR.  
P. O. L. OWEN  
STARBD. ·S M.G.

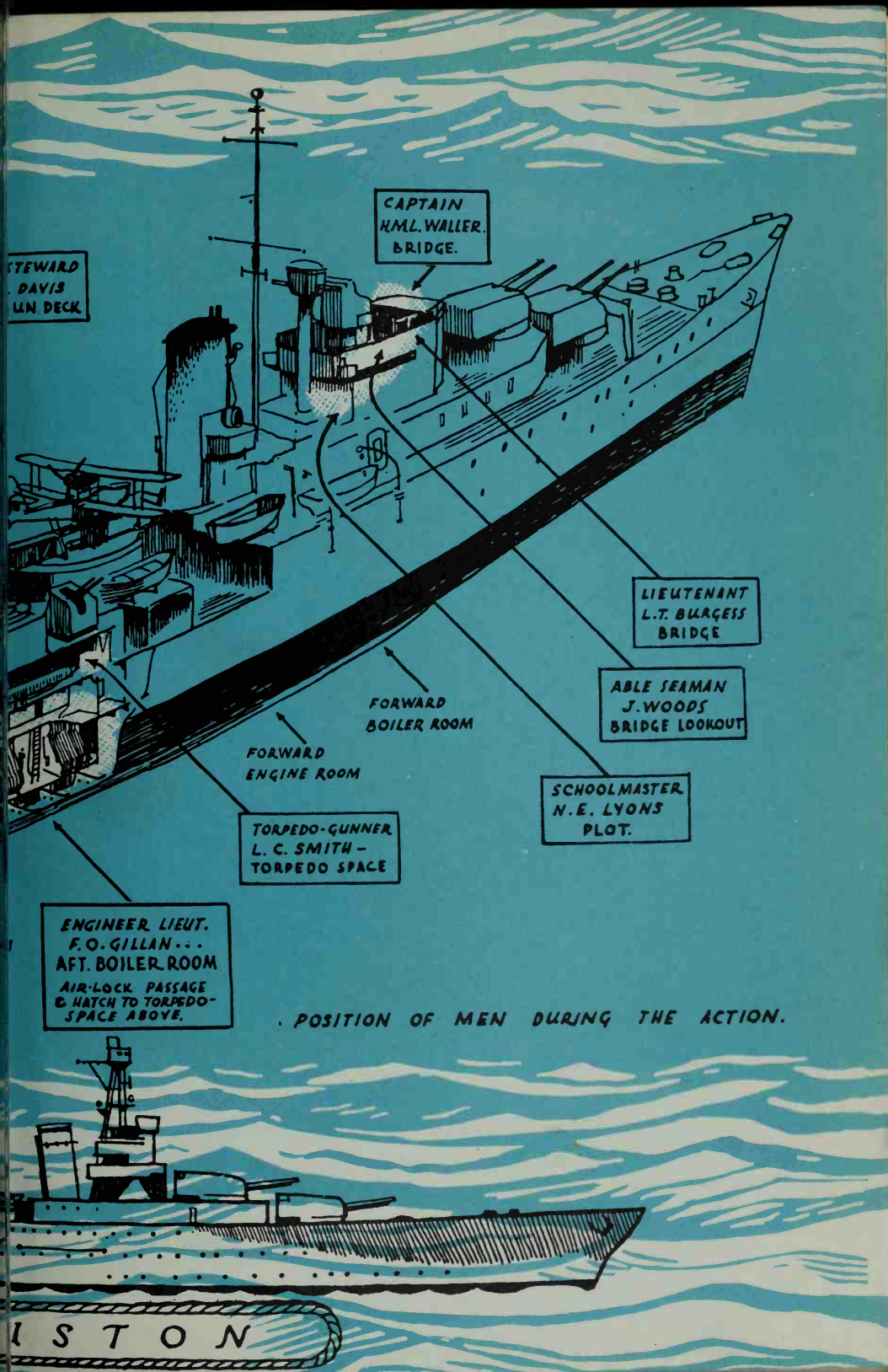
SURG-LIEUT.  
S. E. L. STENING  
WARDROOM.

PAY SUB-LIEUT.  
G. CAMPBELL  
·S M.G.

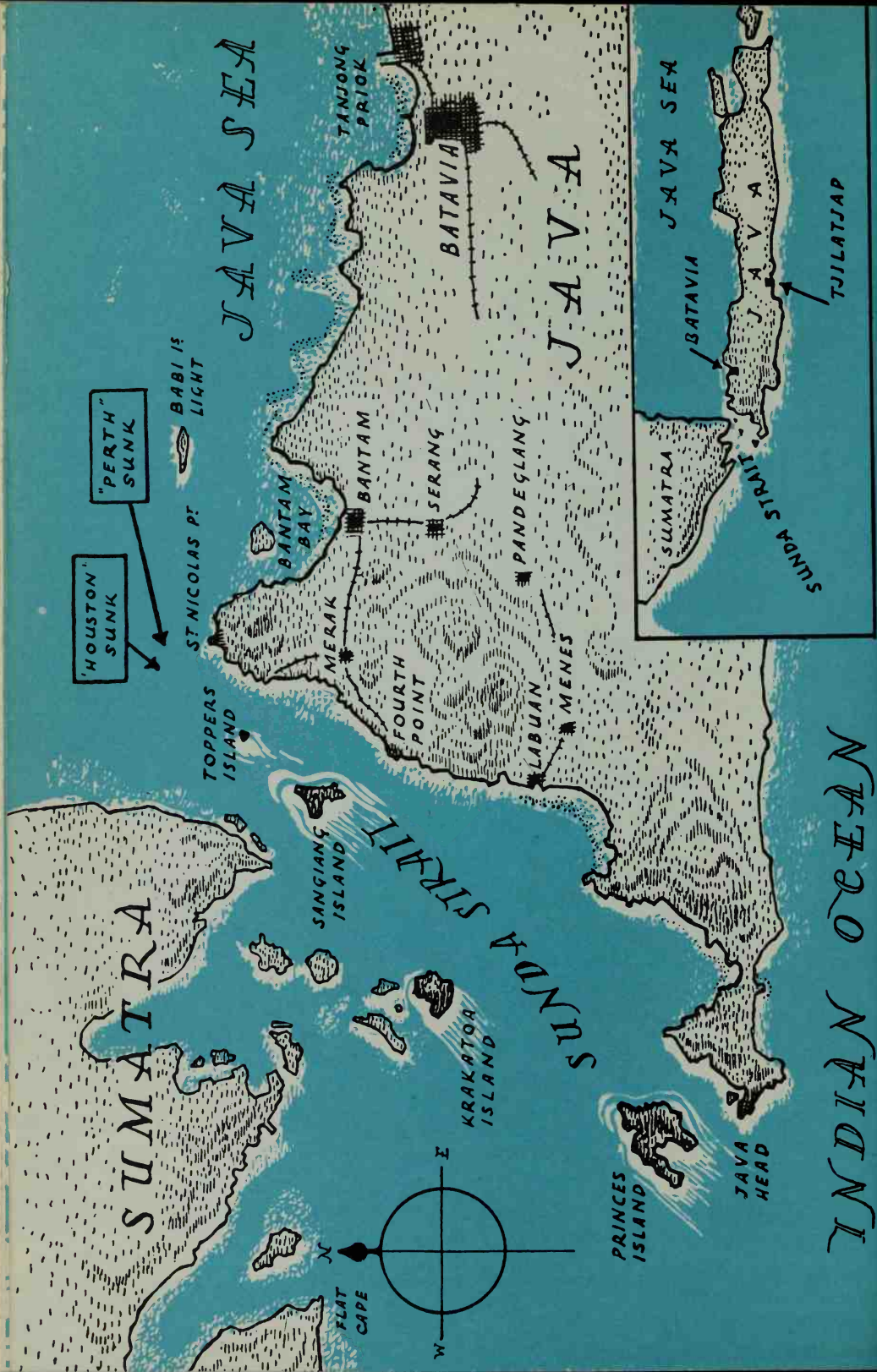


U · S · S · H

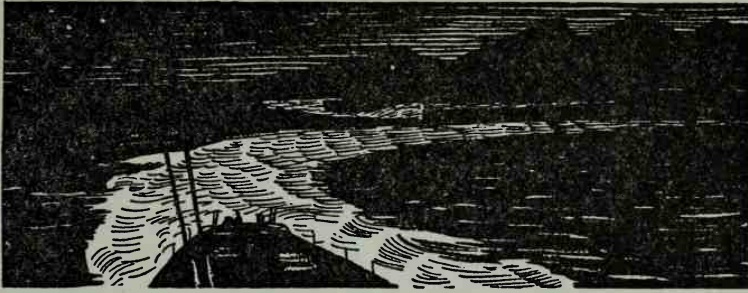




POSITION OF MEN DURING THE ACTION.







Saturday: 8 P.M.

“... I DO NOT EXPECT, HOWEVER, TO MEET enemy forces.”

As Captain Waller switched off, and in the still shuddering silence which followed his last word, Lieutenant-Commander “Polo” Owen left the wardroom and went to his action station—the starboard .5 machine guns at the cruiser’s stern.

The 7000-ton *Perth*, blacked out and trailed by *Houston*, was zigzagging at 22 knots. Her wake was a white brush stroke edged with phosphorus fire and the Java coast was a dim line to port. The night was clear and hot. The sea was calm and moonlit, with visibility up to six miles. The cruiser’s looming mastheads seemed to scrape the brilliant stars.

Owen stood at the rail feeling the screws, almost beneath him, thump-thumping against his sandals, and thinking of the captain’s words. Instead of reassuring him, they left

him restless and full of foreboding—full of unspoken, unpronounceable fears like whispers in the dark.

This thickset man with demanding eyes had been trained for twenty years in the R.A.N. for emergencies. But now he was uneasy as he watched the cruiser's wake and thought of what the captain had said. Somehow, he could not believe that the Japanese, their south-thrusting momentum at its peak, would let them escape. He had already served in the Mediterranean, his son had been born in the middle of an air raid on Alexandria, he knew planes and what they meant. He could not forget that Zero float over them in the afternoon, like a quick dab of mustard against the sky; and he knew the Japanese, with that pilot's report now in front of them, would do everything they could to trap them.

But he was weary and his body ached for sleep and his eyes were full of the grit that means too much waking. He lay on the deck in the moon shade of the black-barreled machine guns. He wore white shorts with his blue Mae West over his white shirt. He put his cap beside him and kicked off his sandals.

But he didn't sleep—not immediately. So much had happened in the last few days. He had been in a battle. He was even in the wrong ship and that meant many of his shipmates were strangers. He felt a little like a stray dog in a strange kennel. Lying there on the deck he remembered the events of the last few days—the reasons why he should never have been in *Perth* during the Battle of the Java Sea, why he should not be aboard now heading for Sunda. And the more he thought about it, the more he came to the conclusion that someone, something, some force

had moved him here and there like a pawn on a board, had planned every minute of his life from the moment he first reached Tanjong Priok. In his mind, he collected the pieces and began fitting the puzzle together. He was a passenger in *Perth* when she reached Tanjong Priok from Fremantle on February twenty-fourth, with orders to join H.M.A.S. *Hobart* next morning. *Hobart* arrived, and he was actually in a boat alongside *Perth*, with the Reverend Keith Mathieson and two petty officers, also on draft for *Hobart*, when an air raid began and *Hobart* put to sea without them. Then *Perth* sailed before *Hobart* returned and the four men missed their ship. The puzzle was complete.

Now he was lying on a deck he should never have been on, remembering the battle in the Java Sea and the cold watery feeling in his guts as the tops of the Japanese cruisers rose above the horizon and their guns winked. He had a grandstand view, standing where he now lay beside the .5. The Jap shells came in from seventeen miles away. Their splashes were close . . . short . . . over. The splashes were very small. The Allied cruisers were in line ahead, a perfect target—*De Ruyter*, *Exeter*, *Houston*, *Perth*, *Java*—with the British destroyers spread in front, the Dutch on the port quarter, the Americans astern.

"This isn't so hot," he remembered saying to Ralph Lowe, the lieutenant-commander with him on the gun. "I wonder why we don't go in."

But old hands on deck were all wondering that—why the Allied light cruisers, sitting ducks for the Japanese heavies, were not being brought into range. With every enemy shell the disquiet grew as men watched how the Dutch admiral leading them handled this battle.

Shells straddled them, and straddled again. The shells went over *Perth* between the masts and just above the twin funnels. The shells, black blurs at the end of their searching trajectory, sounded like expresses going over a high bridge. When the shells went in the splashes jumped from the sea, froze like a still from a moving picture, collapsed suddenly from below, and then the peaks drifted down like chiffon and the sea absorbed them.

He remembered watching, thinking, Now I'm no longer afraid, and being surprised, and then tracing almost casually the path of another packet of shells as they just missed the funnels and hit the sea.

Now Owen pushed the past battle out of sight and lay watching the masts gently sweeping the stars and the moonlight soft on "Y" turret. He thought of Tanjong Priok and its wrecked silence and the feeling of collapse it gave him and the thick smell of fuel oil burning and the bomb damage like a newly erupted disease on the water and among the godowns. . . .

And then he was remembering U.S.S. *Houston's* tall, red-faced commander striding across the wharf and coming aboard to see Captain Waller. He had asked the American's name, and someone had said, "Rooks—Captain Rooks." And later he was on the quarter-deck when Waller had taken the American to his car and shaken hands, and then come back and said, "Well, Polo, are you coming with us, or would you rather be taken prisoner by the Japs?"

Below the deck where Owen lay, Leading Seaman Keith Gosden was at his action station in "Y" turret lobby. He went there soon after *Perth* sailed, and now sat on the deck with his back against the bulkhead.



In front of him was the automatic shell hoist with the shell rack embracing it and shells upright in the rack. Above him a narrow manhole led to the motor room and above that to the turret itself and the 6-inch gun crew. Below the lobby was the shell room and the magazine—claustrophobic rooms of steel below the water line. Behind him was a watertight door, already closed and clamped, which opened into a passageway. This passage led to a watertight hatch in the roof of the shell room, and that hatch was closed.

The lobby smelled of grease and warm steel, and the air was hot and almost sticky. Gosden wore underpants and boots, and the sweat dripped from his dark hair, down his



pale fat face, and onto his shoulders. He had lived in that steel room almost continuously for the last five days.

Now he sat there thinking, not of the war, but of the Sunday-school class he had taught in Adelaide, his home town, before joining the Navy back in 1938. He remembered the faces of those children as he read to them, their concentrated watchfulness, the questioning wonder in their eyes. But among all the faces one kept recurring—the freckled face of a small redheaded girl. He tried to remember her name, but only the face, in miniature, was clear in his mind. He looked round his steel cage, and all he saw now were shells and the hoist ready for action, and sweat got into his eyes and made them sting.

He dozed, almost anesthetized by the heat that seemed to press his temples and the sweet smell of grease and the damp smell of steel. Then a boot scraped on a plate in the motor room above and he woke and thought of Tanjong . . . Red Lead trying to leave the ship . . . men carrying wood rafts and stacking them on the quarter-deck near the stern . . . sweat dripping from a sailor's fingers . . . the chief baker, "Maggy" Moore, watching the rafts coming aboard and saying, "So that's how good it looks, mate. We'll be swimming before the night's out, and will I need 'em! I can't swim a bloody stroke."

Gosden shifted his position against the bulkhead. We'll get through, he thought. My time hasn't come—not yet.

The lobby got hotter and hotter. The air got stickier. The steel vibrated against his back as he dozed.

Sub-Lieutenant Gavin Campbell sprawled beside his .5. The gun was above "Y" turret and at the rear of the 4-inch

gun deck and its four black barrels watched the night sky. He was a handsome heavy six-footer with light-brown hair and Norwegian eyes, and his friends called him "the slab." He lay on the stiff canvas gun cover and rested his white shoes against the rail. He wore white overalls and in his pockets were his antflash hood and long gloves and beside him on the deck was his tin hat with the naval crown painted in front and his rank painted on one side.

He had a curious fondness for that hat, an illogical talismanic love for it that some people give to a rabbit's foot or a piece of the True Cross bought in Port Said. This feeling was something he could not explain, but it was as real as the metal hat itself. The hat was friend, foster child, the war, the Navy and a lot of other things all jumbled together into one unexplainable emotion that was meaningless to anyone else, but strong and lasting to Campbell, as you will see.

He had spent the day at Tanjong Priok working on the captain's official report of the Battle of the Java Sea, getting it ready, before *Perth* sailed, for Commodore John Collins, the Commodore Commanding China Force, who was still in Batavia. Campbell had drafted and corrected all afternoon, and had seen nothing of the port, and now, as he lay on the deck in the moonlight with the warm wind flowing over him, he remembered Waller's exasperation at the conduct of the battle. Waller had not said much—Waller never did—but Campbell could tell that the Old Man thought the Dutch admiral had made a pretty mess of things. There were lines in the report which said little yet told all—critical lines that did not comment. He recalled some of the words, clearly as though they had

been his own: "The rear enemy cruiser was now on fire. *Perth* was still out of range of enemy cruisers and I found a long period of being Aunt Sally very trying without being able to return the fire. Range was still over 26,000 yards. The Dutch cruisers all this time were firing occasionally." So that the Dutch ships, which were also out of range, were just wasting shells, and the Japanese admiral must have hissed with delight at such incompetence.

Campbell eased his aching backside. The gun cover was like a sheet of crumpled metal under him. He thought again of the battle he had just survived—his cold feeling of helplessness, a sort of painless pain, as he watched the Jap gun flashes in the Java Sea and wondered where the shells would land. Then they came in, not fifteen yards from the ship, with hardly a splash and left a dirty brown stain on the sea. . . . And along the horizon there were more flashes, more shells coming. His feeling of helplessness grew. . . . Later, much later, *Perth* was firing fast, and the hot lining of the 6-inch guns protruded from the muzzles like the tongues of frilled lizards. . . .

Now Campbell counted the days since he joined *Perth* . . . sixteen . . . a lifetime, it seemed, packed into a fortnight. He could hardly believe it. And that morning before the Java Sea action, when the Jap bombers were over, and *Perth's* gunners were using the 6-inch like pompoms—that was his birthday, his twenty-first.

On the deck below, Torpedo Gunner Leonard Smith, as solid as an ironbark stump, went about his work as though nothing unusual had happened to him in the last quarter century. He might have been getting ready for the annual



fleet exercises before the traditional cruise south to Melbourne and the Cup. He streamed the paravanes, those large gadgets which look like little metal planes and protect the ship from mines, put the charges in the depth charges squatting in their racks at the stern, put the primers and pistols in his eight torpedoes and patted each gray fish affectionately as he moved among the tubes.

Then he went below, where the air smelled of oil and paint and hot steel and warm asbestos packing, and where the whine of the forced-draft fans and the muffled thunder of the engines told its story of a cruiser at speed. There he had his tea and a cigarette, and at 10:30 P.M. went back on deck and lay down in the torpedo space amidships, weary but content.

He had no worries, no forebodings, no superstitions. He felt well and happy. His fish were ready for action. He was ready. He would face action if it came.

Smith, with his long years of service, knew war—knew its horror and pity, its fear and stimulation—but he had conditioned himself against it and its emotionalism. He had been able to reduce war to simple terms, so that to him it had become the practical application of years of training, timing so split-second that torpedoes leaped overboard and headed for their targets in the shortest time machines and men had made possible.

Smith was an old-timer—disciplined, rocklike, the sort of man any navy to be good must be built round.

He had been in the Royal Navy in World War I.

Half a lifetime later he was in H.M.A.S. *Australia* off Dakar when the Vichy French threw all they had at them with their 9-inch shore batteries and the 15-inch guns of the

*Richelieu*, and even used colored shells to mark their fire—champagne-colored, blue, burgundy—just enough color for a sailor beside Smith to say casually, "The bastards are throwing the port wine at us now. It'll be floggin' beer next."

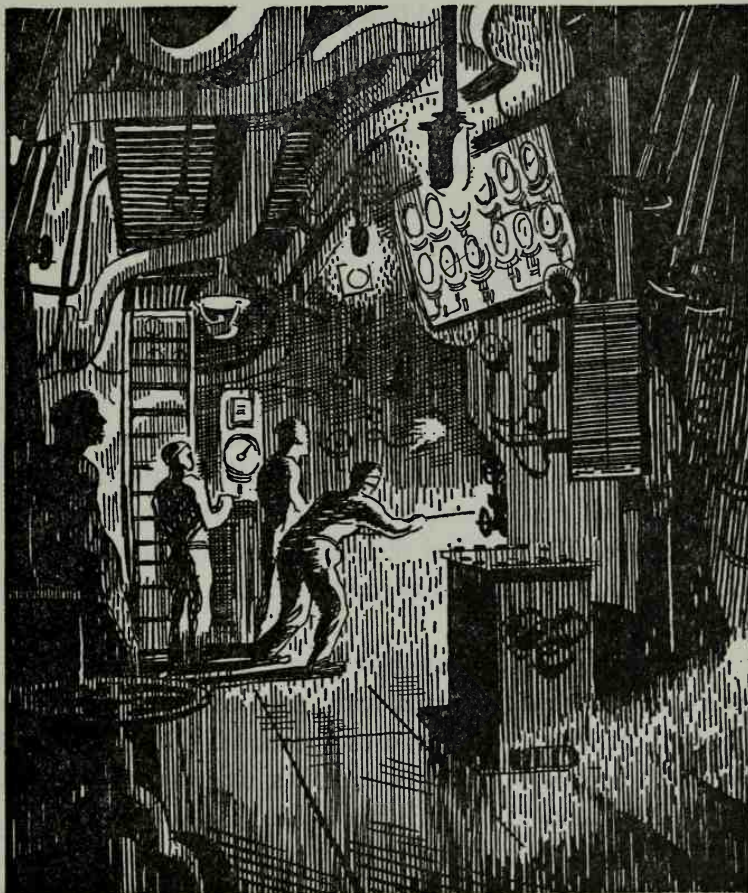
And Smith was in the Battle of the Java Sea.

Now he was lying on the deck, heading for Sunda Strait, remembering that he had left his watch and wallet below and thinking, They'll be there tomorrow.

As *Perth* sailed from Tanjong Priok, Engineer Lieutenant Frank Gillan was eating Cornish pasties and drinking beer with Engineer Commander Robert "Dolly" Gray and Engineer Lieutenant John Mears of the forward engine room. For Gillan those pasties were the last decent food he was to have for nine weeks, and his one beer was his last for four years. But for Gray and Mears it was their last meal.

Gillan, big and solid, with humorous brown eyes and a slow, reasoned way of talking, listened to the other officers discussing the Japanese advance and the Dutch chances of holding Java. They had both been in the Mediterranean, and thought the Java Sea action had been a sorry waste of good men and good ships. They felt that Java was already in the Japanese bag and were pessimistic about *Perth's* chances of escape.

Gillan, too, was worried. As a merchant-marine engineer he was no stranger to the sea, yet he felt out of place and almost lost in *Perth*. He had been with her only a few weeks and knew few of his shipmates well. He wondered what lay ahead, whether they would escape, and reasoned



that there was only a slim chance of slipping through Sunda Strait.

As the others talked, he could not forget that scene on the quarter-deck just on dusk—officers in white grouped round the capstan, someone sitting on the capstan, others leaning against the rail. Captain Waller, too, was there,

holding Red Lead and tickling his ears. The sun was nearly down behind the lifeless port. Shadows on the ship were hard and almost cold, and the guns of "Y" turret seemed bigger and longer than usual. The water was near black. The godowns, with their shattered windows, were gray, and stray windows that had survived the blast winked back at the sun, and the sun glinted on gold shoulder braid. Then the bugle played for Sunset and the ensign came slowly down. At attention, as he saluted the falling flag, Gillan felt that this was a significant moment in his life—significant not only for himself but for the other men round him. He was not a gloomy man, or a man who made decisions without careful thought. On the contrary. But as the flag came down he felt that this moment at sundown was a dividing line between the past and the future and that somewhere a decision had been made affecting his life and the lives of them all.

He left the wardroom at last, and, as he was off duty, went to the cabin he shared with Engineer Sub-Lieutenant Tommy Robins 'way aft on the portside. There he heard Waller's broadcast, but the captain's information did not alter his opinion of their chances. He was to think of that broadcast and his own feelings when, weeks later, a Dutch naval officer and fellow prisoner told him that at 3 P.M. on February 28, and only half an hour after *Perth* had berthed at Tanjong Priok after coming in from the Java Sea, the Dutch naval authorities had received a radio report from air reconnaissance that Japanese war and merchant ships were already entering Sunda Strait in force. That may, of course, have been rumor. Who knows?

Before going to sleep, Gillan followed a ritual that even



war could not break. He opened his Bible and read a chapter. This night it was the Book of Daniel, Chapter XI, and when he reached the end of the chapter he went back and read again verses 40 to 45. These words from the dim past intrigued him with their prophetic topicality:

"And at the time of the end shall the king of the south push at him: and the king of the north shall come against him like a whirlwind, with chariots, and with horsemen, and with many ships; and he shall enter into the countries, and shall overflow and pass over.

"He shall enter also into the glorious land, and many countries shall be overthrown; but these shall escape out of his hand, even Edom, and Moab, and the chief of the children of Ammon.

"He shall stretch forth his hand also upon the countries: and the land of Egypt shall not escape.

"But he shall have power over the treasures of gold and of silver, and over all the precious things of Egypt: and the Libyans and the Ethiopians shall be at his steps.

"But tidings out of the east and out of the north shall trouble him: therefore he shall go forth with great fury to destroy, and utterly to make away many.

"And he shall plant the tabernacles of his palace between the seas in the glorious holy mountain; yet he shall come to his end, and none shall help him."



Gillan put his Bible aside and went to sleep.

*Perth* was moving out through the mine fields off Tanjong when Surgeon Lieutenant Sam Stening went to see Commander Martin, who had a slightly sprained ankle. Martin was cheerful, almost gay.

"We're all right now, Sam," he said. "We've just had a signal from a Dutch recce that Sunda Strait is clear. We're going to Tjilatjap to fuel. We're all right now."

They talked about the Java Sea action, then Stening returned to the wardroom, which was still set up as a casualty station. The portable operating table was on one side and near it stood the polished sterilizer on its stand. Beside the table was a smaller one holding instruments covered with towels, and on a box were bottles of anesthetic and a mask.

He looked at the instruments and thought, I hope we don't have to use them.

In the wardroom Stening and his ten assistants had already spent more than thirty hours closed up in a temperature of more than 100 degrees before and during action in the Java Sea. After twelve hours he had started a roster system to let his men go on deck for fresh air; after twenty-four hours the heat in the wardroom was almost unbearable, and the men were limp from exhaustion.

Now, as he checked again to see that everything was ready for action, he remembered little flashes of talk and incident during the last few days. The men waiting, with nothing to do but wait, reminded him of things—small but significant things. . . .

Waller saying, as they left Surabaya with the Striking Force, "We're going out to meet the Japs, and we're going to give the little yellow men what-ho." . . .

The tinge of yellow in the captain's skin; mild jaundice; liver upset due to gall-bladder trouble; the captain had been lying down before the Java Sea, but was always dressed and ready for action; he was a sick man. . . .

The tension among the men in the stifling wardroom. The way some of them couldn't keep still, and others couldn't stop talking. . . .

His own fears, cold and humiliating, which he knew he had to control, must control, because he was in charge, because morale depended a lot on how he behaved, on how little he displayed his own feelings. . . .

That book he read—as shells hit the water close to the ship's side with muffled thuds—without registering its title, author, size, shape or simplest word. . . .

The exciting saltiness of a boiled bacon sandwich—the only food he had during those seemingly endless hours in the Java Sea. . . .

He was still recalling images like these when the amplifier, pouring the captain's voice into the wardroom, brought him back to the present, and when the broadcast ended he looked at his men and saw that they were grinning.

"You can relax now," he said, "I'm going to turn in."

In his cabin, which he had not seen since leaving Surabaya for the Java Sea battle, the gunfire had smashed almost everything glass—mirrors, tumblers, light shades, bulbs. Glass was sprayed everywhere, even on his bunk, in fine splinters and shavings. He wiped it off with a towel and brushed it into a corner with his shoes.

He was still wearing his white boiler suit. In his pockets were bandages, his fountain pen, cigarettes, matches, his wallet containing a few pounds, and a silver cigarette case

bearing the gold naval crown—a present from his wife. And suspended on tabs of material sewn on his suit were scissors, syringes with their hypodermic needles attached, bottles of morphia, their rubber covers ready for impaling.

He stripped and lay on his bunk. Then, with a curious ability he has to pull down a mental blind and shut himself off from all emotional stress, he stopped thinking of the immediate past or speculating about the immediate future, and completely relaxed.

Big, blond and naked, he slept.

Petty Officer Steward Bill Davis lay on the deck near the port 4-inch guns. He was nearly lightheaded from fatigue. With twenty years' service in the R.A.N. he was no youngster, and lack of sleep and strain of long action had exhausted him.

But this small, dark-haired, rather frail-looking man was not worried that night. He had the old sailor's faith in his captain, and overwhelming faith in Waller. If Waller said they would get through Sunda, they would get through.

Davis had only just taken the captain his supper, but to this day he can't remember what he served at that last meal. The captain had said not one word, and had not looked his brightest, either; but then, he had been off-color for days, though nobody would have guessed by the way he flung *Perth* about at 30 knots in the Java Sea.

Lying there now Davis remembered the time Waller picked up a slab of plum duff from his plate, carried it to the bridge, waved it before his startled officers, and said, "I bet you've never tasted anything like this in your life."



Davis smiled at the stars, and the ship, swaying a little, rocked him to sleep.

In the plot, the small nerve room directly under the bridge, Schoolmaster "Tiger" Lyons sat on a box with his shoes on a case of 30,000 Woodbines he had scrounged at Tanjong Priok. On the wall in front of him were dials and instruments and speaking tubes and telephones. One tube led direct to the bridge, so that he could hear every word spoken there. With his charts spread in front of him, his job was to plot every detail he could of action—speed, course, times, numbers and disposition of enemy ships. This is where he had worked in the Java Sea, sealed like a crab in a shell, seeing nothing of that battle except what his instruments and his ears told him, yet getting a better "picture" than most men in the ship.

But this was his third night without sleep, and he had ceased to think. He didn't care if *Perth* got through or blew up or stood on her stern. His brain felt like hot porridge. He dozed and woke and dozed.

Lieutenant Lloyd Burgess was stumbling from exhaustion as he reached the navigator's sea cabin abaft the bridge. He took off his shoes, put his tin hat on top of them, and lay on the deck. Then he lighted a match and looked at his watch, and his arm vibrated with the cruiser's speed. The time was 8:30 P.M. He dropped the match and slept.

As assistant navigator, he had spent the day working on the official plot of the Java Sea actions—the map or drawing of the long battle which showed the Allied ships and

their courses and maneuvers in timed relationship with the Japanese force. And only when he got the picture down and was able to see on paper the revealing circles and course changes, the Allied cruisers strung along like crows on a fence with the light cruisers out of range for half an hour and being repeatedly straddled by the Japanese heavies—*Perth* alone eight times in a row and unable to fire a shot—only then did he know why the Dutch admiral had lost not only the battle, but his own life.

Somehow, Burgess had finished the plot and grabbed half an hour's sleep, the first for fifty hours. But at 4 P.M. that Saturday he was on duty again as officer of the watch, too tired to be bad-tempered, too tired to think of anything except his beaten body's calls for rest. From 4 P.M. to 8 P.M. his only thought was how to keep on his feet, and when he at last reached the sea cabin he could not remember one order he had given or the name of one man he had spoken to in those four hours.

Able Seaman John Woods was 19, a good-looking youngster with thick dark hair and a smile that would make any girl throw her bonnet over the windmill. He had just been through his first action, and had not seen one gun flash, but, working like a mad thing down in the cordite handling room below "A" turret, he had known the Japs were straddling them when their shells, smacking the sea, sounded like great chains thrashing the cruiser's sides. But he had not been afraid, and he still did not know why, except perhaps, as he reasoned later, you know fear only when you have time to think of fear and yourself as one—and there

was no time down there between one cordite bag going up to the guns and the next.

Now, as he sat in "A" turret lobby, he looked at his watch. The time was 10:55 P.M. He crawled from the lobby and went up to relieve No. 2 Lookout on the lower bridge.

Saturday: 10:55 P.M.

AT 10:55 P.M., WHEN JOHN WOODS LOOKED at his watch, Captain Waller, on *Perth's* bridge as she raced for Sunda Strait, had ninety minutes to live.

The death of Hector Macdonald Laws Waller, in the grim first hour of March 1, 1942, went almost unnoticed by his countrymen. The newspapers, when the report of the Battle of Sunda Strait was released, mentioned that he was captain of the lost *Perth*, but that was about all. His extinction was just one of the many tragedies of war. It was barely noted, then forgotten.

But Waller has a high place for all time in our history—a much more distinguished and honored place than some of the personalities who now adorn it. He was, among other things, perhaps the greatest fighting captain the Royal Australian Navy has produced.

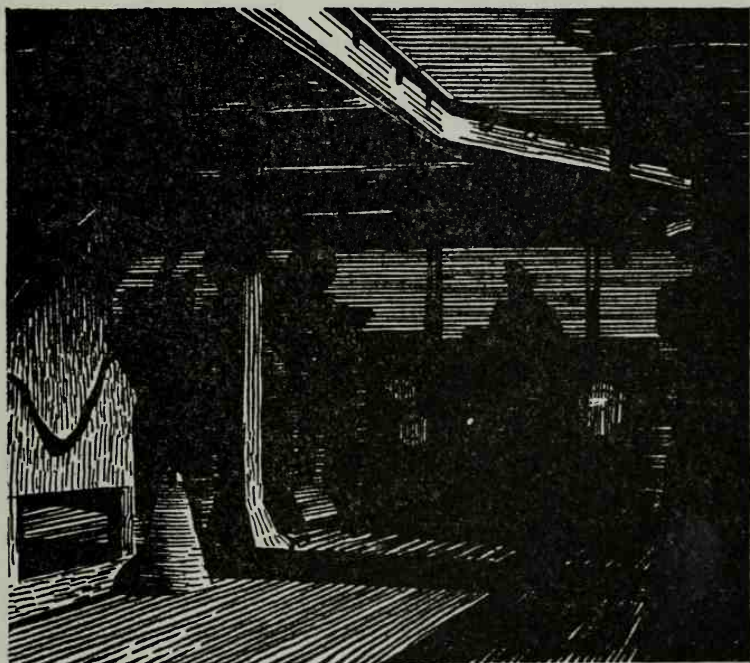
And yet the only recognition this gallant leader ever received from his country was a posthumous Mention in Dispatches—although before he fought his last magnificent battle of Sunda Strait he had already won what few officers ever achieve, two D.S.O.s for valor.

Captain Waller, who today would have been an admiral, was a strange synthesis of uncompromising orthodoxy and unconventional flexibility, but over-all he was an uncommonly simple man who invariably behaved so naturally that



people who did not know him well thought him extremely sophisticated. Yet it was his very simplicity and his total lack of pretension, of sham, in any form which made it possible for him to take his place with ease in any society. He was equally at home chatting with a dockyard worker or an admiral, a rating or a governor. He did not merely give the impression of being at ease—he was at ease.

Leaning against his bridge rail or walking the quarter-deck or even in civilian clothes he seemed to broadcast strength—the inner controlled strength of a man strong physically and strong spiritually, who knew where he was going, and knew why. He was not one of those big men



who achieve a certain domination over their fellows because of their sheer mass, or who lead by their mental brilliance. He was neither massive nor intellectual.

Waller was stocky, with heavy shoulders and thick legs and a head like a rounded head on a Roman coin. You saw his head first—before you were conscious of the rest of him. In those last days his hair was light brown and thinning, his eyes were blue-gray, his forehead high, his mouth—it clamped a thick-bowled pipe that seemed built into his face—was wide and full-lipped but firm and rather severe in repose. His voice was strong, resonant, the sort of voice you turned to listen to, but he had no accent you could localize, not a trace, and he often answered questions or commented with drawled grunts—a language shorthand all his own—which said all you wanted to know or told you nothing.

He was certainly not a man who wasted words, as many an anecdote confirms. Flat on the deck during an air attack in the Mediterranean, he said to a sailor lying beside him, "Not bad, is it?" and the sailor replied, "Not so floggin' good, either."

"Hardover Hec" some men called Waller because he tossed destroyers or cruisers about like harbor speedboats. "The Fighting Fool" was the name others gave him because he would attack anything from a submarine to a battleship. But most people knew him as plain "Hec"—and all loved him.

He was a man—a free man—and his life and his death proclaimed this essential dignity.

Waller was a personality in his own right, in his own dour, unemotional, rather baffling, lovable way. He was

clearly no ordinary run of the rut. He had a spark you didn't know was there until you knew him well. Then you realized it placed him always a little apart from his fellows. If he had any clear philosophy he expressed it in six words, when the going was rough: "It's the rub of the green."

Once, after lunch at the Governor's palace at Malta, Lady Bonham-Carter, a charming and intellectual woman, took her guests to see the gardens. She spent most of the afternoon talking to Waller—she had met him only that day—after he had protested that her famous rosebushes were badly pruned.

"Do you think you could improve them?" she asked.

"Yes," he said.

A few months later, when he was invited to spend a week's leave at the palace, he astonished the Maltese gardeners, and Lady Bonham-Carter, by actually pruning all her roses—not to impress her, not to prove himself right, but because he enjoyed pruning roses—and doing it correctly—in the Malta sunlight.

Waller was also a favorite with Lady Cunningham, wife of the Commander-in-Chief in the Mediterranean, who once asked him to get her some sewing machines she had heard were among the loot at Tobruk. The machines were badly needed for sewing parties at the residency at Alexandria.

The next time Waller was at Tobruk he remembered the request, but when he got ashore the British military police would not let him enter the town.

"But surely I can go in," Waller protested. "I helped capture the place—and I'd like to see the results of our bombardment."

The M.P. shook his head. "Sorry," he said, "but nobody

can go in. If I let one in we'd soon have the place full of those bloody Australians pinching everything."

Waller later outmaneuvered the police, liberated two Italian sewing machines, took them aboard his destroyer, and delivered them to Lady Cunningham. But he would have done the same thing for anyone's wife, if she had asked him.

Waller emerges again and again as one of those rarest of individuals—an extremely well-balanced personality. He treated admirals as he treated the youngest rating—directly, courteously. He gave defaulters the same calm consideration he gave his commander. He heard evidence, asked a few questions, and delivered judgment. And those judgments lacked heat or cold, and were without moralizing. He very seldom lectured.

He was fair, serious-minded, and always reasonable. He was an officer with a profound sense of responsibility toward his job and his men. He had an almost uncanny ability to make others feel secure and to trust him implicitly, and a way of never varying in his attitude to those under or above him. Perhaps this, his capacity to be always the same in his relationships with his fellows, a characteristic all men responded to, was his greatest asset as a man and as a great commander.

When ratings said, "Hec's a gent," they were not interested in his antecedents or his upbringing. They meant they liked him, respected him, and would follow him to hell if that was absolutely necessary.

If there is such a man as a "typical" naval officer, then Waller could never have been classed as one. He was an individualist who somehow survived the rigid conditioning



of naval training and remained essentially himself. The one thing you could always be sure about Waller was that he behaved as he wanted to behave, and not as convention dictated, although he could be as conventional as a Victorian matron. He obeyed rules rigidly; he broke them freely; and he invented others to suit himself. He was Waller—always.

At sea during the Mediterranean winter he wore an ancient dark-blue polo-neck sweater, dirty gray slacks, and a little knitted cap. In summer he wore a blue milanese shirt, torn at the back and generally dirty, filthy shorts, and a filthy cricketing hat.

Ten minutes in from a fight and he would be over the side in shorts and shirt, with a packet of squashed sandwiches in his hip pocket, to spend the next few hours sailing his 12-footer round Alexandria Harbor.

He was the despair of paymasters. They generally caught up with him just as he was about to push off in his little boat, and he would scribble his signature across masses of long-delayed documents while squatting on the floor boards muttering into his stinking pipe. Or he would call on a junior officer while on his way to dine at Government House and discuss anything from battle tactics to bullfighting. Or he would go to a cabaret and drink whisky as he practiced his execrable French on Greek or Yugoslav taxi dancers.

He had a passion for guns, and in the Mediterranean always had a rifle handy on the bridge and sank, with armor-piercing bullets, every floating mine he saw. He repeatedly warned his crew, when they went ashore in captured ports, not to souvenir, but when a stoker once returned from

Derna with a Breda automatic in a velvet-lined case, Waller looked disgustedly at him and said, "Why in hell didn't you bring one for me?"

He also liked walking in new places, going off alone, pottering among rocks, collecting shells and studying their fern and wavelike patterns, examining plants and trees, watching birds, and storing detailed visual memories he never forgot. As a child he knew every rock and re-entrant in the hills above his home town, and before the war, when he was serving in the Mediterranean, which he knew like his own back yard, he would land on one of the Greek islands—those shell-pink islands stained by a washtub-blue sea—with a shotgun and sandwiches and spend the day exploring alone.

He was a man who was never bored because his interests, like his personality, were outside the ruts of routine. He was just as interested in a hovering dragonfly as he was in the mechanism of a torpedo. When he dined with one family in Alexandria, he invariably went to the kitchen to compliment the cook, an Armenian girl, particularly if she had served his special, a cheese *soufflé*. He liked introducing people to caviare, particularly red caviare which gourmets sneer at, but he preferred the red to the black and didn't care what the gourmets said or thought. He captured some cheap and nasty Italian brandy in Derna, made cocktails with it, and gave it to all his shuddering friends. He thought the brandy was magnificent, and nobody had the heart to tell him that his cocktails were like hell-fire.

He was rare and earthy, orthodox and unconventional, positive and perverse, and few men or women did not like the uncommon blend.

Hec Waller, youngest of eight children, was born at Benalla, Victoria, on April 4, 1900, so that he was a child who arrived between two eras, the end of the Victorian and the age of security, and the beginning of the warlike and revolutionary twentieth century.

His father was a grocer, his maternal grandfather a bullock driver. And his parents named him after the Britisher, General Hector Macdonald, who fought in the Boer War, and after a Waller ancestor, Admiral Laws of Napoleonic times.

From the age of nine he had already made up his mind to join the Navy, and he never deviated from that aim. He went to Benalla High School and finally, in 1914, to the Royal Australian Naval College at Jervis Bay.

Waller was a bright youngster, but not exceptional, although his parents and teachers noticed early that he never forgot anything he saw and months or years later could still describe it, and describe it vividly. When he was eight, and still attending the local primary school, his mother asked him one night what homework he had to do.

"Draw a map of Europe," he said.

"But you haven't an atlas."

"I don't need one," he said. "I went into the next room at school today with a message. I had a peek at a map of Europe on the wall while the teacher was reading the note."

This extraordinary visual memory, which lecturers and fellow cadets were later to comment on, was probably the reason why he eventually became a signals specialist—the most brilliant, too, in the history of the R.A.N. His knowledge of signals, and his physical mastery of all signaling methods—he would often grab a lamp and send a message

himself—was almost uncanny, and he had the distinction of being the only naval officer ever to do better in a signals course than Lord Louis Mountbatten—a recognized authority on the difficult subject. Waller was a fanatic about signals, or communications as they're called today, so much a fanatic that they were the only thing this even-tempered tolerant man ever lost his sense of humor about. He drove his signals subordinates near demented, and to joke about signals, or tell stories about signalmen, was heresy.

Waller was an efficient officer who expected efficiency, but he never demanded the impossible and never worried men when they had a job to do. This was his way of demonstrating his trust in them, and they responded.

In the early days of World War II in the Mediterranean, the fleet was moving to bombard the Dodecanese coast. Waller was in command of the 10th Destroyer Flotilla, but his destroyer, *Stuart*, a veteran of World War I, broke down, and Walter Rands, his engineer commander, had to stop both engines to start repairs. The fleet admiral signaled: "I must leave you. No signals can be made. You must fend for yourself. None of our ships are supposed to be in this area. If one of our subs sink you it can't be helped. Good-by."

Just like that—but that is war.

Waller asked his engineer how long repairs would take.

"Five hours," Rands said.

Rands then went below and started work. He and his men worked for five hours, and in all that time, while *Stuart* wallowed helpless, he sent no message to the bridge and received no message from the bridge. At the end of five hours



Rands reported, "Ready to steam, sir," and Waller's reply was "Thanks, chief." That was all. Only later did Rands learn that, while he was working on the engines, *Stuart* pinged a submarine with her Asdic, and worse, the submarine put up its periscope and took a long look at the stationary destroyer. Later still, when back at Alexandria, he also learned that the commander of the submarine, a British one, was about to torpedo *Stuart* when his first lieutenant asked to have a look and recognized the Australian destroyer. Many another captain, with a submarine about to sink him, would have frantically signaled the engine room and demanded that the chief try to move his engines. But not Waller. His chief had said that the repair job would take five hours. He accepted that, and made no further demands on an efficient engineer—even with a periscope which could have been German or Italian within torpedo range.

Waller, as this incident and his record show, was a brave man. But he was not foolhardy brave or one of those rare individuals—and they do exist—who don't know fear. Danger scared him. Bombs scared him. He never denied it. Shells, his tools of trade, he regarded as the most terrifying things of all. But he never showed fear in any way, and was always ready to attack at the drop of a hat. He was a brave man when he had to be, but he never took silly or unnecessary risks.

When Lord Louis Mountbatten was bombed and sunk in the *Kelly* off Crete and signaled for help, *Stuart* was near. Waller at that moment was under orders to rejoin the battle fleet 'way south of Crete, and knew that he would

risk his ship—he almost certainly would have been bombed—if he went to *Kelly's* assistance. And so he decided to leave Lord Louis in the water.

Another time, when alone, Waller went in to attack what he thought was an Italian cruiser and two destroyers. The ships turned out to be a British tug towing two small craft. But he had gone in ready to fight, and he would have fought if those three ships had been enemy.

"Only God knows what would have happened," a friend once said, "if Hec had ever commanded a battleship—and He would have jumped overboard in terror in the first half hour at sea."

Waller had more than a touch of the old wild sea-dog tradition about him. He would have made a fine Elizabethan. But he could also be as coldly logical as a calculating machine.

On June 10, 1940, for instance, when Benito Mussolini dragged his country into the war on Adolf Hitler's side, the Commander-in-Chief in the Mediterranean (Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham), in the battleship *Warspite*, led practically the whole fleet to sea and went looking for trouble. *Stuart*, and two other destroyers of the 10th Flotilla, had to stay behind to do antisubmarine patrol off Alexandria. Waller was disgusted, but he ran into more trouble than the battle fleet did.

Three big Italian mine-laying submarines started work a few hours after the fleet sailed, and *Stuart* steamed into the middle of one of those fields. Waller and his specialists promptly plotted the mines by Asdic—this is believed to be the first time anyone used this method to plot mines—and then, by very careful maneuvering, began to wriggle out

to safety. One miscalculation, and *Stuart* would have disappeared in a burst of orange flame. Waller even mustered all hands amidships because he reasoned that if the destroyer hit a mine she would most likely do it with her bow or stern.

He got his ship clear of the major group of mines and reached for his signals pad and wrote a message to the local admiral at Alexandria. "Have located enemy mine field in position xyz. Have buoyed center of field. When I get out I intend to continue search for further mine fields." Just that. Not, "If I get out." Not, "Thank heavens I'm out. Propose to anchor. Send out mine sweepers," or something like that, but: "Intend to continue search."

Later, *Stuart* found another field, and, after sweepers had cleared it, yet another. Then *Stuart* helped *Voyager* attack a submarine, and for the combined job Hec Waller and Commander (now Commodore) J. C. "Copper" Morrow got their D.S.O.s.

Waller had genius for understatement. His signals showed it. They were no casual things scribbled in haste and transmitted at speed. And they showed that he had a very subtle, very British way of self-advertising.

He once took *Stuart* and two other destroyers to Sollum to see if he could help the troops with a few shells. He steamed in and was about to anchor when, just for a change, shells began to splash around him. Our troops were getting out and the Germans and Italians were coming in. Waller promptly hauled off and did a beautiful bombardment. He also reached for his pad and signaled Alexandria—such a superbly simple signal, too:

"Am bombarding Sollum."

The naval staff at Alexandria got excited, but not Admiral Cunningham. When he read the signal he chuckled.

"Relax," he said. "If Waller's doing it, it's all right."

Waller, in command of the 10th Destroyer Flotilla, was at the Battle of Calabria on July 9, 1940—the first major action in which the British Mediterranean Fleet had fought for more than a century, and the first time an aircraft carrier had supported a fleet in action. But his great battle was Matapan, on March 28, 1941—when H.M.A.S. *Perth* also took part. Admiral Cunningham once called Matapan "*Stuart's wild night*." In this battle, in which the British lost one plane, and the Italians lost five ships, including three heavy cruisers, and one battleship damaged, Waller's *Stuart*, which would not steer below 10 knots because near-misses had ripped all the plating off her rudder, torpedoed one cruiser, smashed up a destroyer, and damaged another cruiser.

For that action, Waller won his second D.S.O.

Admiral Cunningham—old A.B.C. as everyone in the Middle East called him, and the greatest British admiral since Nelson—had almost fanatical faith in this Australian. Waller, who was not unaware of this, once said to Cunningham in his direct way: "Don't you think I deserve a better and more modern flotilla than the Scrap Irons [his ancient and famous 10th]?"

"Yes, you do," A.B.C. replied. "But to get them would mean leaving the Med—and while I'm in the Med, you're in the Med."

There was strong affinity between these two men, probably strengthened by Waller's refusal to treat old A.B.C. any differently from the way he treated his ratings.



Before a sweep or strike in the Mediterranean, Cunningham generally called his commanders to a conference and put them in the picture, and at the end of one of these gatherings he asked, as usual, "Any questions, gentlemen?" And Waller, as usual, had one ready. He disagreed with a statement of the C-in-C and said so. There was an argument, and finally Cunningham barked, "Get out of my cabin, you bloody Australian." But later Cunningham called him back, and they spent the next hour drinking gin together.

But perhaps the most famous Cunningham-Waller story concerns depth charges. Waller was noted for never taking a chance that a ping on his Asdic might not be a submarine, and because of this *Stuart* had the reputation, not undeserved, of being the ship which dropped more depth charges than any other in the Mediterranean.

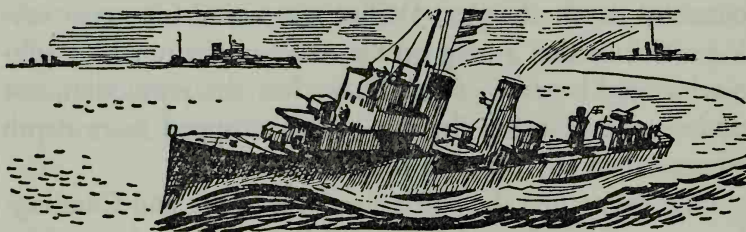
One day, when the battle fleet was at sea and Cunningham was conferring with his staff in his cabin, the familiar *woomph-woomph-woomph* of depth charges came from the distance. Without looking up from his papers, A.B.C. said, "Ah, I see Waller's rejoined the fleet."

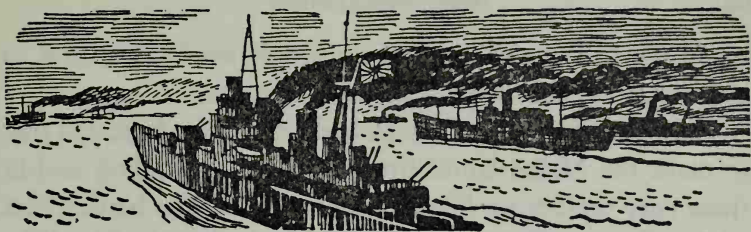
When Waller's *Stuart* finally left the Mediterranean for Australia, Admiral Cunningham sent this signal to the Australian Naval Board: "We on the Mediterranean Station much regret that H.M.A.S. *Stuart* is to leave us. This gallant ship has achieved an unsurpassed record under the distinguished command of Captain Waller. In all the major operations of the Mediterranean Fleet she has played a leading role and no call for a difficult duty has ever been in vain. To keep this old ship operational and efficient, the work of the engine-room department has been above praise.

The departure of the great little ship and her gallant crew is a loss to the Mediterranean Fleet."

This was a great farewell and tribute from a great admiral to the worn-out destroyer, her brilliant commander, and the fine men who served her. . . .

But all that was already history as *Perth* neared Sunda Strait in the last hours of February 28, 1942, and Hec Waller watched the moonlight on the sea and on his forward turrets, and dimly to port, like a smudge, was the land he would never return to.





Saturday: 11:6 P.M.

AT 10:45 P.M. BABI ISLAND LIGHT WAS THREE miles to starboard, and a few minutes later *Perth* and *Houston* were opposite Bantam Bay, near the northwest end of Java, and five miles off shore.

They were nearing Sunda Strait at last through waters where much history had been made—where Chinese battle junks had sailed, where men had fought for pepper and nutmegs and bases and personal power, where the tide of religion had ebbed and flowed. . . .

The Hindus had come from India to settle in Sumatra 1,200 years before and then to reach Java at Bantam.

Six hundred and fifty years before Kublai Khan had sent a thousand ships and twenty thousand men this way, not to conquer Java but to avenge Javanese insults to his ambassadors and bring upstart Java under his imperial vassalage. And about the same time—nobody really knows—traders had brought Mohammed's Koran, the book that has domi-

nated the Indies and most of its people ever since, first to Sumatra and then to Java through Bantam.

Here, too, four Dutch ships had arrived on June 5, 1596, to make the Netherlands' first link with the Indies; and in these very waters, on Christmas Day, 1601, the battle fleets of the Christian Dutch and Portuguese had clashed, and the Portuguese had been driven from the Java Sea.

Now, as *Perth* and *Houston* neared Sunda, the ships and men of a modern Khan were moving on Java, not to avenge insults, or to establish any theoretical vassalage, not even to force by arms a monopoly of trade, but to kill and take in the name of a not very robust descendant of a mythical Sun Goddess.

With Sunda Strait almost in sight, *Perth* increased her speed and *Houston* followed. They were steaming at 28 knots now, shuddering, straining, creaking under the vibrations of their mighty engines and thrusting screws.

In another hour, perhaps, they would be almost through Sunda Strait. In two hours or less they would be in the Indian Ocean—and out of the trap.

Then, at 11:6 P.M., when five miles from St. Nicolas Point, the extreme northwest tip of Java, with the Java Sea on its right and Sunda Strait on its left, Captain Waller sighted a ship close in to the headland.

"Challenge," he ordered. "It's probably one of our corvettes patrolling the strait."

The chief yeoman, Bert Hatwell, grabbed his Aldis lamp and winked the code letters.

The other ship replied. Her lamp was a strange pale green. Her reply was strange.

"U.B., U.B.," Waller said. "Repeat the challenge."



But as *Perth's* Aldis winked again the other ship began to turn and make smoke, and as she showed her full silhouette Waller said: "Jap destroyer . . . sound the rattles . . . forward turrets open fire."

Then he called: "One unknown."

*Perth's* bow swung to bring the broadside to bear on the enemy. Then at point-blank range, her 6-inch guns spewed shells and orange flame.

In the plot below the bridge, Supply Assistant Ronald Clohesy kicked Tiger Lyons on the shin.

"It's on," he said. He might have been announcing lunch.

Lyons jerked upright and was just in time to hear the captain's order to the guns, and his words, "One unknown." That was Lyons' cue to break radio silence and report action to all shore stations. He scribbled the code signal and handed it to Clohesy who ran to the radio room behind the plot as the guns opened up.

And only Darwin, away to the southeast, ever acknowledged that signal that the Battle of Sunda Strait had begun.

Fear now was in Lyons' guts, fear cold and hard like a chunk of ice lodged between his solar plexus and his navel. Fear stayed with him for minutes, urgent and degrading, and in those minutes he felt physically dirty and hated himself. Then his panic ebbed as a shell hissed under the ship—hissed deep under the racing keel with the sound a soda siphon makes when it spits into a glass of whisky.

Now *Perth's* guns were crashing like houses falling down, and through the speaking tube he heard someone on the bridge above say, "There are four to starboard," and another voice, "There are five on our portside"; and then a

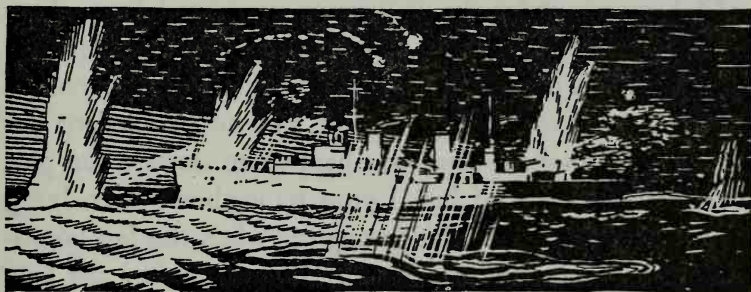
surprised "By God, they're all around us," he recognized as from Allan McDonough, the Royal Australian Air Force flying officer with the ship.

Lyons heard the captain order divided control to the guns, and soon after independent control so that each gun could pick its own target. There were plenty, too. His plot of the action already showed thirteen Japanese destroyers and two cruisers attacking them—and that was only part of the enemy force. He knew then he and his shipmates were in for a dirty night, but his early panic never returned. His plot showed that the farthest Jap was only three miles away, the closest less than a mile. The Japanese cruisers were firing over and through their own destroyers, and he thought, I hope the bastards sink one another. The Japanese and Australian and American gunners were almost looking down one another's guns.

As he plotted *Perth's* zigzag course, Lyons, who in his steel room never saw one gun flash of that action, knew through his instruments that she was turning in a big circle with a diameter of about five miles. Waller's object, he could tell, was to circle and protect *Houston's* blind stern and to maneuver against torpedo fire. The course changes were so frequent and violent as Waller swung his racing cruiser that Lyons jerked from one side of the plot to the other. It was like being in a car skidding badly on a slippery road. Mechanically, he recorded these course changes, watched his dials, jotted down times, speed, engine revolutions, enemy positions. He was not afraid—not even worried now. Instead, he felt a strange detachment—like being an onlooker watching the action from some independent vantage point. But his shirt stuck to him like wallpaper,

and sweat dripped down his fingers and down his pencil onto his pad.

At 11:26 P.M. he noted down that *Perth* collected her first shell—in the forward funnel—with a burst of steam like a locomotive blowing off, and then another somewhere near the flag deck at 11:32. And at 11:50 she got another, near the waterline, which burst in the ordinary seamen's mess. But she was still unharmed, although the Japanese had flung thousands of shells at her. Forty-four minutes after action started she was still fighting with every gun she had, except her useless machine guns, and so was *Houston*.



Then, at 12:5 A.M., a torpedo went into the forward engine room on the starboard side, and Lyons felt *Perth* lift and hang as though she were actually floating in the air. He thought, When will she come down? Then hundreds of ship identification photographs poured on top of him from pigeonholes in a cabinet on the bulkhead above. They frightened him more than the torpedo. He cursed.

"Wouldn't it!" an assistant said. "Now it's a bloody snowstorm."

This was Fred Lasslett, one of his electrical mechanics

who was waiting in the plot for damage reports. Lasslett began to pick up the photographs, and David Griffiths, the other mechanic, helped him. They gathered them in bundles, sorted them into rough order, and stuffed them back into the pigeonholes.

Then a second torpedo hit—and all the photographs poured out again. Lasslett shrugged and left them there. He took a slab of chocolate from his pocket and began to eat, gazing at the dials with their flickering needles. Shells howled over, but he didn't even look up.

"Do you reckon we'll make it?" Clohesy asked casually.

Lyons shook his head. "Doesn't look like it."

Clohesy opened a tin of biscuits scrounged from Tanjong and started munching. Lyons noticed with admiration how calm this thin-faced slender kid was. He showed no fear, no emotion except a sort of amused nonchalant detachment as though what was happening outside the plot were little concern of his. Lyons remembered then lying flat on the deck beside this youngster when the Jap bombers dropped a stick across them at Tanjong before the Java Sea fight, and watching him, amazed, as he played tittattoe with a pencil stub on the deck as the bombs burst.

And watching him, eating biscuits now as though he were in his father's shop somewhere in Victoria, Lyons suddenly felt proud to be in action with a boy like this—and humble before such bravery.

John Woods had just reached No. 2 Lookout on the lower bridge when *Perth* opened fire. As the first gun flashes died he looked aft and saw *Houston* switch on a searchlight, and at the end of the cold blue shaft were the



silhouettes of Japanese merchant ships packed close together against the Java shore like cattle sheltering against a wind-break. Then all *Perth's* guns were firing, and the crashing against his ears from then on was continuous. It was like holding his head against a thin wall someone was trying to batter down from the other side.

All round him now the yellow lights that winked were Japanese guns, but he had no sense of fear. This surprised him. He had often wondered what point-blank action would be like, and, now he knew, he decided it was not half so exciting as a good football match.

He had nothing to do except watch. He tried to estimate the position of enemy guns by the shell splashes in the water round the ship, but soon abandoned that. There were too many guns and too many splashes. Yet in all that battle he heard only one shell—one that came in very low and skimmed the bridge like a train a few feet above his head.

When the first torpedo hit he wondered what had happened. He thought it was a shell. When the second torpedo hit, he knew, for he felt *Perth* jump out of the sea, jump ahead and fall back again. Then, quite calmly, he thought of his mother and prayed.

"Look after the family at home, God," he said, "and try to look after me if you can."

But in all that hell let loose and guns winking and metal flying, he was still not afraid.

The general alarm bells woke Len Smith. He knew what to do. He ran to his starboard torpedo tubes and took the pins off the warheads while his No. 2 and No. 3 opened the

breeches and put the charges in, and his No. 4 and No. 5 swung the tubes out and trained them. Ten seconds after the alarm he reported to the bridge by phone, "All ready."

He still did not think *Perth* had run into serious trouble, but three minutes later he knew he was wrong. From the torpedo officer on the bridge came the order, "Bearing red 20. Enemy ships. All tubes ready." He waited. The next order, "Changing target," countermanded the first. The third order was, "Bearing three cruisers." Then, ten minutes after action started, came the order to fire, and the four fish leaped outward with that metallic rattling they make—like an old car jerking along a road full of potholes.

"Torpedoes running," Smith reported.

He ran to the portside and got off four more fish. As he watched them run he counted twelve Japanese destroyers under the light of star shells. Then he saw two big explosions and yelled, "You beaut!"

He grabbed the phone. "We got a couple of hits."

"We did better than that," the torpedo officer yelled back. "We killed with the first batch of fish, too."

With all his torpedoes gone, Len Smith detailed some of his crews to damage control on deck. They ran out fire hoses, while others joined the men carrying ammunition to the 4-inch guns.

But Smith still wasn't overworried. He still felt that Hec Waller would get them through, even when, just before the first torpedo hit, he counted eighteen Japanese destroyers attacking in packs of six—like gray beetles with red eyes rushing toward them. Then the second torpedo came in with a roar that even smothered the gunfire and left men

dazed. Then water poured down on Smith and his men as if someone had cut the bottom out of a tank.

The water fell and slid away. Slowly he wiped his face with his sleeve and felt the sting of salt, and thought, Now we're a goner.

Bill Davis was dreaming that a telephone was ringing beside his bed. He tried to reach for it but could not move his arm. Then he was awake and the action buzzer was going above him. He had only one feeling—surprise that of all people Bill Davis should be in two major actions within twenty-four hours.

He was supposed to get to his Red Cross action station, but, without knowing why, he joined the line of men carrying shells from the magazine to the 4-inch, and from that moment time ceased for him and noise replaced it. At first he noticed how the men about him worked as though they were at a practice, but soon they were running with the shells, talking, shouting, pushing one another out of the way, cursing. They cursed the Japs, they cursed one another, they cursed the gun crews. And the gun crews, serving the guns like maniacs, cursed everyone as they operated their mechanism.

One of the ammunition party sang in a shrill tenor that the gunfire cut to pieces, so that Davis heard only stray notes divorced from one another and high like the crying of a sick child. Another man kept yelling, "Flog the Japs, flog the Japs," in an endless chant. Another shouted, "You beaut!" as he ran cradling a shell.

Davis never doubted they would get through. He kept

thinking, I wonder what time we'll get to Tjilatjap. He knew Waller would save them, even after the first torpedo hit, even after the direct hit on one of the 4-inch guns. He never forgot that. One moment he saw a gunner sliding a shell into the breech. Then a flash like a scarlet cloth seemed to wipe the man, the crew, and the gun itself into the sea. One moment there was a gun in action and men were yelling and cursing as they served it. The next moment there was only an empty space on the deck where the gun had been, and the sour stink of an exploded shell.

The guns woke Gavin Campbell, and the first thing he thought about was his tin hat. Wearily he picked it up and put it on, but forgot about his antirash hood and gloves. He growled to Douglas Findlay, the A.B. with him on the multiple gun, "The bastards never let you sleep."

Then he heard the gong in "Y" turret just below him, and the sound reminded him of a Sydney tram bell—brassy and urgent. It told him "Y" turret was about to fire. His body tightened as he waited for the shock. Then it came and the blast, as it poured over him, was like the heat wave from a bush fire. The flash momentarily blinded him, and his sight was just back to normal when the guns fired again, and again and again. Soon, every time the 6-inch fired he pleaded with them to stop. Soon, the tension was almost pain itself, and he felt his inside would burst if the guns fired any more. But they did fire—crash, crash, crash. And then he was angry, angry because of his own helplessness above the big guns, because of the futility of standing beside his useless gun like a shag on a rock, angry because he had always wanted to fire the four black barrels and exult



in their metallic argument and couldn't now because there was no time between the blinding flashes of the 6-inch for him to focus on a target. He cursed and Findlay cursed, and their faces were like quick close-ups on a screen as the guns flashed.

Once, during a sudden pause in the firing, he saw enlarging spots of light on two Japanese destroyers and knew they were opening the shutters of their searchlights. Then the 4-inch cracked and put the lights out. And as the lights went out something crashed against the gun shield close to his head and spun into the deck at his feet. A star shell flowered, high and brilliantly soft, and he looked down and saw a chunk of jagged metal, about six inches long, impaled in the deck. The jagged piece of shell looked exactly like a map of New Guinea.

He was facing astern as the first torpedo hit. He felt *Perth* rise and drop, and then everything was, for a long moment, as hushed as the bush at noon, before a great pillar of water and oil collapsed on him. When he wiped his eyes he was still facing astern and saw the dim shape of *Houston*, and from the shape was pouring stream after stream of red and blue and amber tracer as though madmen were throwing electric light bulbs across the sky.

Down in "Y" turret lobby Keith Gosden jumped up as he heard a clatter in the turret above. He knew what that meant and thought, as he always did at these moments, Is this it? Then the automatic hoist squealed and began to move, and he started feeding shells into her. And, above, the guns went off.

For an hour he worked like a machine to keep the shells

up to the guns. Only twice, before he fed into the hoist a dozen practice shells, and realized, with a shock, with sudden dismay, that the magazine below was empty, did he have time to think or notice what was going on around him. Once, he shouted, "What are you doing up there?" and the turret captain, Alfie Coyne, yelled back, "You can pick your own target—there are hundreds of the bastards." Once, Jesse Garrett, one of his helpers, collapsed with the heat and lack of air, and he propped him against the bulkhead and went on feeding shells into the hungry hoist.

Then the first torpedo hit, and lifted Gosden off his feet and dropped him on his face. And as he scrambled up he saw that the lobby was leaking through the rivets. His youngest assistant, a brave boy of eighteen, saw the water, too, and began to yell. He grabbed the boy's shoulders and shook him back to control. When the second torpedo came the water poured into the lobby. At the third torpedo the three men were up to their knees in water.

They watched it rising, climbing up the sides, up the shell hoist. Then the others looked at Gosden and he thought, God, we must be sinking! We'll drown if we don't get out of this.

And then he wanted to scream.

Polo Owen woke to see two rockets falling. They were chartreuse and scarlet and soft against the night sky. They dropped lazily and he thought of Guy Fawkes Night when he was a child in Western Australia, and of how his brother once set off a Chinese basket bomb under his bottom. Then the guns opened and he jumped to his feet, but could see nothing, as he pulled on his antiflash gear, except *Perth's*

superstructure dim and high ahead and the shadowy faces of his companions.

"What the hell are we firing at?" one of the gun crew asked.

Then the cruiser suddenly increased speed, and seemed to run away from under them. The stern where they were stationed seemed to Owen to dip almost under the sea as the ship jumped forward and began to fling about like a destroyer as guns on every side flashed and went out, flashed and went out.

He noticed "Y" turret swinging on an aft bearing, and he and the others flattened behind the Carley float, which was lashed down near their gun position, as the 6-inch fired. The flash poured over them like dragon's breath and singed the hair on their arms above their antifiash gloves. The anchored Carley jumped six inches and fell back. The guns swung away, searching for the next target, and a searchlight reached out and grabbed *Perth's* stern.

In that blinding blue glare Owen felt twenty feet high, naked and more helpless than he had ever felt in his life. It was like looking down the barrel of a gun and knowing that the gun was about to fire. The faces of his companions looked pale green and distorted—faces from another planet. In the paralytic tension of the searchlight's beam an inner voice told him that *Perth* was doomed. He heard the 4-inch snap, as though from a great distance, and the searchlight went out. Then, as "Y" turret swept round and roared again directly aft, he dived for the deck behind the Carley float.

Lying there, angrily conscious now of the futile part they were playing, he said to Ralph Lowe, "This is bloody

stupid. We can't do a thing. Let's get to hell out of here."

Lowe nodded. "We'll get blown overboard if we don't."

And the others agreed.

They all ran along the quarter-deck to the torpedo space under the 4-inch-gun deck. Owen, on the starboard side, was just in time to see four torpedoes like gray cigars leap into the sea, and as he watched them he thought, Where can I go where I won't get hurt? and knew there was nowhere to go.

All along the horizon now the Japanese gun flashes were like electric lights switching on and off, and he saw the shell splashes, in the light of *Perth's* and the Jap guns, were pale blue topped with soft white plumes which waved gently as they fell back into the sea.

Then he heard a splintering crash forward, followed by a silence, which rushed in and replaced all sound, more terrifying than the din of battle. He ran to the port torpedo space, but it was empty of men. He felt powerless, useless. He thought, This is bloody awful. If I only had something to do—something to occupy my hand or my brain. He returned to the gun at the stern, but it was now twisted metal and parts of the Carley float, draped round the barrel stumps, made the remains of the gun look like a scarecrow in a paddock. He was thinking, I missed by seconds being like that, when the second torpedo hit, and the whole ship seemed to crumple and splinter. He felt he was standing on a matchbox and it was collapsing beneath him. Three sailors ran aft bawling "Abandon ship," and with them he tried to unleash the stacked pilgrim rafts. He tore his fingernails, but the knots would not move. The blast of the 6-inch guns had made them as rigid as metal.



"Anyone got a knife?" he asked, thinking, The Carley was my abandon-ship station. Now it's the rafts or nothing.

The men shook their heads, and ran back along the quarter-deck.

*Perth* was already listing to port, but still moving. He went to the starboard side and looked over. The screws were slow-thumping and one was almost out of the water. It seemed so close he felt he could touch it. He went forward along the portside. The deck was deserted now, and somewhere forward steam was escaping with a thin high wail. He looked over the side and the sea seemed very near. He thought, There's nothing I can do now, as he climbed the rail.

Sam Stening swung off his bunk as the guns opened. His heart he felt had already dropped six inches. As he pulled on his boiler suit and slid his feet into his sandals he thought, The guns shouldn't have gone off. We're done for this time.

He ran across the flat to the wardroom. His men there were white-faced and silent. None of them had been in action before, except in the Java Sea.

"This is it, boys," he said, hoping desperately that the cold tightness he felt did not show in his face or voice.

"What do I do?" asked Mathieson, the chaplain.

"Just sit down," Stening said. "There's nothing to do. We just wait."

He could think of no other reply, but for some reason of association he suddenly remembered the time the chaplain, a teetotaler, had drunk cider and thought it was soft

drink. Stening smiled secretly at such a stray and meaningless thought at a time like this. But he felt better, steadier. The tightness like a belt round his chest had loosened a hole or two. He said to himself, Don't panic, you bloody ape. Do your job.

But he and his men had only one job—to wait for casualties. And waiting in a closed steel room was infinitely worse than being on deck, watching, doing. Waiting was enough to break the bravest of men. He sat on a chair beside the operating table, but the ship heeled and tipped him out. He tried again, and the same thing happened. He noticed some of the men grinning and thought, They're better now—they're all better.

*Perth* was flying about like a crazy thing, 7,000 tons of metal changing course every few seconds it seemed. He felt this was a bad sign, but he was a Pitt Street sailor and kept his thoughts to himself. He studied his men as the racket above got worse. They were trying not to show what they felt. One man sat with his eyes closed, but could not keep his fingers still; another licked his lips with a furry tongue, like a lizard; a third . . . He thought, Thank God, they're solid.

And then, as they waited while all hell was loose above, hatred of war welled in him like sudden anger, hatred of its futility, its endless destruction of life and material, its failure to solve any of the basic problems of overcrowded, ignorant, hungry mankind.

Stening had lost all consciousness of time now, and when a man in a repair party yelled from the wardroom flat, "Casualty on the 4-inch gun deck," he did not know whether the action had lasted minutes or hours and didn't

care. He detailed four of his men, and they left with a stretcher. He waited perhaps ten minutes, but they didn't return. They never returned. He noticed that boiling water was slopping from the sterilizer, and sizzling down its polished sides, and that one of the men aimlessly combed his fingers through his hair. He had another party ready to go when he heard a shout, "We've been hit forward."

"That doesn't concern us," Stening told his men.

But he thought, What a silly statement! Of course it concerns us—it concerns all of us. This is life or death for these men, for myself.

Then the first torpedo hit and *Perth* seemed to jump.

Hell, he thought, that was something pretty big!

It reminded him of the time in the Mediterranean when a bomb nearly lifted his destroyer out of the water. He had been sunk that time, by dive-bombing Stukas, in the Australian destroyer *Waterhen* along the "Spud Run" to Tobruk. He had no wish to be sunk again.

As *Perth* seemed to flop back into the sea and steady, an order came over the loud-speaker. Mixed with the crash of gunfire it sounded like "Prepare to ram," and he shouted, "Everybody lie down." The men dropped and lay there, but nothing happened, and slowly they got up and watched him—sheeplike, patient, but tense. He looked at their eyes. He could tell now they knew they would soon all have to swim. Calmly he thought, Soon I'll be in the sea.

Less than a minute after action stations, Frank Gillan had climbed into his overalls, put his torch in his pocket, and pulled on his Mae West and only partly inflated it. He

was not to know until later that this last decision probably saved his life.

He left his cabin and ran forward along the alleyway, and as he ran sailors slammed the watertight doors behind him and locked the dogs. He reached the airlock above "B" boiler room, closed the steel door, and then went through and down the feet-polished ladders into the stokehold, twenty feet below the waterline. Here he was in a familiar world—so familiar that when Gillan dreams he always dreams of engine rooms—of boiler fires and steam and pumping pistons and the whine of turbines. The air stank of hot steel and oil and cordite sucked in by the turbo fans which thundered above like aero engines. The glare from the fires was terra cotta on naked chests of men in front of oil burners, and red on their cheeks as, with heads swung sideways, they watched the hand signals of Chief Stoker Reece. Above, among the tubes and ladders and wire and gauges, the white insulated steam pipes, as thick as a man's body, were like enormous copulating grubs.

"Pretty sudden, wasn't it?" Gillan yelled at Tuersley as he reached the bottom of the ladders. The warrant officer grinned.

Gillan went to the stocky chief stoker and stood beside him. Reece, his backside propped against the electric oil fuel pump, was watching the pressure gauges, and close to him were the discharge valves like rows of organ stops.

The racket now made even bellowed speech almost inaudible. The fans were pumping in the crash of gunfire, and the noise seemed to come in solid and fall on top of them. The ship was twitching like a man in an epileptic fit. The water in the long gauges above the boilers was



bouncing and the water levels in the gauges reflected the light of naked bulbs like diamond facets. Every time the 6-inch fired the huge boilers, generating 20,000 horsepower, jumped up and back as though a giant fist had slugged them. They jumped, Gillan noticed, when the guns actually recoiled, not when they fired, and he could tell which way the guns were firing by the way the boilers shifted. Steam pipes, too, were vibrating and jumping as though they were alive, and from them little pieces of asbestos packing were floating down like gentle snow.

"How on earth did I get myself here?" he asked. "God knows what's going to happen."

And instantly he realized he was talking to himself—aloud.

He yelled in the chief stoker's ear, "I say, chief, it's time we had a cup of khai."

Reece just heard him because he yelled back, "I had mine before I came down, but I'll get some organized."

He signaled to a big redheaded stoker and pointed to his mouth. The stoker grinned, made the cocoa and brought Gillan a cup.

The heat, despite the gale from the fans, was getting worse. It seemed to press inward on Gillan's eyes and ears, and to press down on his cap. He was used to it—heat was part of his life—but he saw one of the stokers, a first-trip man, stagger and recover and reach for the salt tray and drop a pinch into his mouth.

Now Gillan lost all sense of time. His only concern was steam and more steam for the engines. Time became oil and burners and the thundering pulse of steam. Then the fans sucked in a terrific explosion he knew wasn't a gun or

a shell. He and Tuersley and the others jerked into the air like puppets, and as they landed the plates slammed against their heels and jarred their spines and teeth. To Gillan it felt like driving a draft horse in a springless cart over a 12-inch log at a hand gallop. He knew a torpedo had got them, knew, but only later, it had hit between the forward boiler room and engine room, and in that engine room the officers he had dined with only a few hours before and all the others with them had died instantly. Three men, too, he also learned later, had been standing on a grating above the engine room when the Jap fish hit. Instantaneously the grating went red under their feet, melted in seconds, and they fell in and died in seconds. The sea followed the torpedo and boiled and thrashed among the red-hot ruin. The men there died without knowing what had hit them.

But the only damage in Gillan's boiler room was a broken water gauge. As water sprayed and sizzled down the boiler, he jumped to the turning handles and shut off the cocks sending water into the gauge. Tuersley signaled to one of the artificers, who shinned up the ladders and started fitting a new glass to the gauge.

But Gillan noticed now that the ship had lost life. One moment she was almost human—swinging, bounding, swaying. The next she was sluggish and listing slightly to starboard. Then she straightened, but slowly, almost reluctantly. She seemed tired, listless. He looked at the sides of the boiler room and said, "If a fish comes in there it's finish." And once again he realized he was talking aloud.

Then one of the turbo fans cut out; but Tuersley, who had all the answers, knew what to do. He had been in the Mediterranean, and was no stranger to breakdowns of this

kind. He climbed, hand over hand, without once using his feet, grabbing pipes and handrails until he reached the top of the boiler room where he fiddled with the fan until it came in again with a pulsating whine. Then he slid down and glanced at Gillan as much as to say, "Easy, wasn't it?"

After another big explosion, the ship listed and seemed to go down a little by the head. Then she leveled out, lost way, and rolled to port. She was still steaming, but Gillan felt the plates under him moving like a ship in a rough sea. Then came another explosion, and the boilers began to scream and blow off at their safety valves.

Gillan grabbed the phone to the engine room. It was dead. He tried to call damage control. Dead. He called the bridge. Dead. He tried to ring the telegraph to the engine room. The telegraph was jammed. As the ship listed again, Tuersley said calmly, "We'd better shut the boilers down," and Gillan nodded, and Tuersley shut off the oil supply to the burners.

Then Gillan saw that everyone, every man in that stokehold, was looking at him. The ship had a 45-degree list, he noticed, and then he thought, God, she's going! *Perth* was dead now except for the fans which were still whining and the lights which were still on, so that he knew the boiler room diesel generator was still working. The ship rolled again and seemed to slide away from him. He looked round at the men standing there, near naked, waiting, calm, and their quiet courage gave him courage. He signaled upward with both arms. But there was no rush, and he thought, What men to serve with! As they moved up the ladders, he said to Tuersley, "We ought to shut the oil fuel off completely. If we don't, she'll catch fire while we're escaping."

As they shut everything they could, Gillan saw that the bottom of the stokehold was now empty of stokers. Then he waved Reece and Tuersley on up the ladder.

Please God, not again! Lloyd Burgess thought as the action started. In the dark he fumbled for his shoes, found his tin hat, and stumbled on to the bridge. He was still half asleep and testy as an overtired child, and didn't care if five hundred ships were attacking them. All he wanted was sleep, but every time the guns went off he jumped and his tin hat fell down over his eyes and that woke him up and made him mad.

He could see the dim shapes of the captain standing forward on the bridge, John Harper the navigator, near the binnacle, Peter Hancox the gunnery officer, Johnson the first lieutenant, Willy Gay the officer of the watch, Guy Clarke the torpedo officer, Bert Hatwell the chief yeoman, Allen McDonough the R.A.A.F. flying officer, Frank Tranby-White the paymaster midddy. And every time the guns flashed the men on the bridge were deep-etched against the violent light as though in a brilliantly clear photograph.

Between the gun bursts he heard Waller's voice, "Starboard twenty," the ship swung; "Midships," the ship steadied; "Port fifteen," the ship swung; "Midships," the ship steadied. On and on it went like a monotonous chant in a jungle of light and dark. He heard Waller call "What about those targets on the port bow?" and the navigator's quick reply, "They're islands, sir."

The only light on the bridge was the almost hidden glow under the hooded chart table. Burgess tried to take notes of the action, writing in the dark by feel, forming his words



as a child forms them, large and crude. Then the gunfire rattled the chart table to pieces. He propped the pieces up, fixed the hood, and carefully edged his head and shoulders under to check his notes. Then the table collapsed again and he backed out from under the ruin and left it there.

A searchlight got them and Waller called, "For God's sake shoot that bloody light out!"

Behind and below Burgess heard the 4-inch barking. The light blacked out.

In a silence that lasted only seconds, Burgess felt his heart hammering and all sound was within himself, so that he could almost hear the blood pumping through his body. Then the deck heaved as the first torpedo got them.

"Forward engine room out . . . speed reduced" came the report.

"Very good," Waller said.

Aft, a shell wrecked the plane and catapult with a crash like two trains meeting head on.

Then "B," "X" and "Y" turrets reported to the gunnery officer that they were out of shells and were firing practice bricks with extra cordite.

Then "A" turret reported five shells left.

Then the 4-inch reported they were firing star shells—and the last of those.

Hancox told the captain.

"Very good," he said.

The second torpedo seemed to hit right under the bridge—and among other things it jammed the hatch in "B" turret magazine, and the men there went down alive. The ship seemed to leap from the sea, straight up, and drop back. Those on the bridge went up with her and came

down on their knees. When Burgess fell, he was facing aft, looking up at the director tower, and he wondered if it would fall on him. Then with a noise like escaping steam, water and oil fell on the bridge and knocked some of the men over.

"Christ," Waller said, "that's torn it! . . . Abandon ship."

"Prepare to abandon ship, sir?" Hancox queried.

"No—abandon ship."

The fateful signal went over the intercom—for those who could hear it.

"A" turret fired again—her defiant last—and Burgess' tin hat again fell over his eyes. When he pushed it back the bridge was empty, except for Waller, Gay and himself. The captain was standing far forward blowing into his Mae West.

As Burgess went down the ladder he heard Waller say, "Get off the bridge, Gay," and as Gay left Waller was standing with his arms on the front of the bridge looking down at the silent turrets.



Sunday: 12:7 A.M.

As BURGESS WENT DOWN THE BRIDGE LADDER shells were fluff-fluffing over and Japanese searchlights were opening up like a summer carnival. He had one objective now, and only one: escape.

He yelled, "Abandon ship!" as he went across the flag deck. There were bodies among the shadows, and the darker shadows were shell gashes and blood. He crawled under the wreckage of the catapult and reached his abandon-ship station, a Carley float on the portside, and as he got there a shell hit an ammunition locker and hot metal whined and cried above him like kittens in a basket, and he dragged his tin hat down over his ears.

Three men were already at the Carley. One of them, John Harriss, an A.B., was grinning.

"Did you hear of Chips King?" he said. "He was lugging a four-inch star shell when we got abandon ship. He jumped overboard with the shell in his arms."

Burgess wasn't amused—not then. He wanted to get off, and as soon as possible. They tried to move the float, but it was too heavy. Then, as *Perth* listed, they were able to slide it down the deck and into the sea and jump after it and pull themselves aboard.

The first thing Burgess did when he was free of the ship was to go through his pockets. He threw away a sodden packet of cigarettes, tore up his notebook with the notes of the action in it, and took off his shoes and tossed them into the sea. Then he looked up, as the dying cruiser moved past them and away, and thought, Thank God, I'm clear of that!

"No—abandon ship."

The captain's voice, clear and hard, came down the speaking tube to the plot. The men there looked at the deck-head, and then at Lyons.

"Shoot through," he said to Clohesy, who was still eating biscuits.

He shook hands with him, and with Lasslett and Griffiths, and with Tony Spriggins, the P.O. telegrapher, who was standing in the door of the plot. He followed them out, but remembered his code books and went back and heard voices on the bridge, including the captain's, but couldn't hear what was being said. He had just grabbed the code books when a shell hit the bridge, ripped the side



off the plot with the clatter of a foundry at full blast as it burst upward, and flung him against his table. Then the lights went out and he thought, This is a bloody silly place for a schoolmaster to be in.

For a moment he panicked and rushed for where he knew the door must be. Then he recovered, groped back to the speaking tube and yelled, "Plot stopped." There was no answer—no voices now. He called again, "Bridge, this is the plot." Then as the ship sagged to port, he felt his way out to the flag deck where he slipped and fell to his hands and knees. He fumbled for his torch and turned it on. There were broken bodies all round him, and blood under him, and sticky on his hands, and one of the dead smiled, and another had no face. There was a pile of bodies, stacked up by blast, in an alleyway. He swung the torch. There was a body beside him, without head, legs or arms. He looked at it and wanted to be sick. He got to his feet, jumped to the ship's side, grabbed a paravane rope, swung out and dropped, and as he came to the surface through thick oil someone was calling plaintively for help and purple tracers were going over low—*zip, zip, zip*—and a sailor swam up to him and said, "Did you get any souvenirs, mate?" and before Lyons could answer lifted from the water a heavy pair of binoculars slung round his neck and added, "These bastards'll make a good hock when I get back to Sydney." Lyons was so amazed he opened his mouth and took in fuel oil, and the oil made him vomit. After that he kept his mouth shut.

He swam slowly toward voices on the water and reached *Perth's* cutter and crawled with other men over the side. But she was jagged with shell holes and filled and sank, and

a sailor panicked. He kept going up and down, up and down, screaming and gurgling until he drowned. Then a packet of Jap shells landed perhaps one hundred yards away. The concussion slammed against Lyons, and a spurt of water, as though from a pressure pump, rushed into his bowels and out again. He was sick, and someone called, "It smashed my guts," and Lyons thought, This is bloody awful. It's Saturday night—our only night free from the kids. I should be dancing with my wife.

He was on his own now, but he knew he would not die. Then he saw two men clinging to a 44-gallon drum, and as he swam up to them one said, "I'm leaving," and the other groaned, "Oh, God," and disappeared. Hanging to the drum, slippery with oil, Lyons looked about him and saw the last of *Perth*. She was over on her portside sliding down by the bows. Her screws were high in the air, naked and almost indecent above the sea, and one was still turning as though it was tired. Then she disappeared. He didn't know then, but Burgess on his float also saw the ship go and looked at his watch—the watch he had paid £5 15s. for. It was still going, and the time in the glare of searchlights was 12:25 A.M.

Lyons heard a man call, so he swam away from the drum toward him and met Yeoman of Signals Percy Stokan, who asked cheerfully, "Having any trouble?"

"Plenty," Lyons said. "The ship's sunk, I've lost thirty thousand cigarettes, my neck's stiff, and this bloody Mae is worrying me."

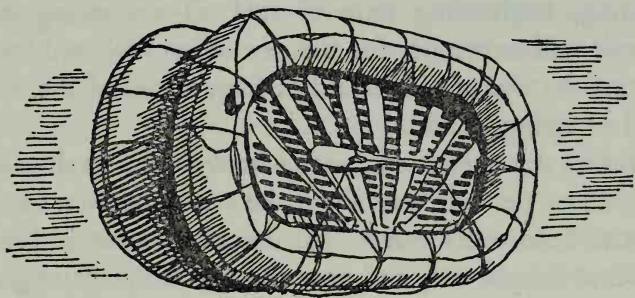
"Okay, okay, I'll hang onto you while you get your clothes off."

As Lyons pulled off his uniform and his shoes a sailor swam up and said, "You blokes got a knife?"

"Christ—what for?" Lyons asked.

"What for?" the sailor said. "There's a team of floggin' Japs in the water over there and I've got a few floggin' bills to pay with the floggin' little Shinto bastards."

Woods climbed down from the lower bridge and helped cut a Carley float adrift and get it into the sea on the port-



side. But an inner voice warned him, Don't get into it—keep away from it. He noticed that the others too seemed reluctant to leave the ship. Not a man moved, and as the float drifted away one said, "What if the old girl is afloat in the morning?" and another snapped, "Don't be a bloody fool—she's almost under now." But, still, not one of the eight men there could leave the ship, and they watched the float drift astern and disappear.

This momentary mood of indecision died as a shell hit the 4-inch-gun deck and showered sparks like an oxy-welding torch and crying lumps of metal. Woods saw a raft in

the water and dived over the side, and the others followed. This was one of the pilgrim rafts—copper tanks encased in timber with trailing life lines. Soon many men were on or around it. Mechanically, Woods counted twenty-eight heads.

"Me mate here's hurt," someone called.

Those on board lifted the man from the sea and laid him across the raft. In star-shell light Woods saw that his face was green-tinged and twisted and that his eyes were closed, and he thought, What will we do? And then he got his first sickening, frightening taste of fuel oil—something every survivor will remember for the rest of his life—and for the first time he was afraid, afraid of fear, afraid of the water, afraid of dying, afraid.

Another star shell burst, and as he watched its slow sinking, brilliant yet soft way above, he remembered a book he had read before the war which described how oil fuel on the water caught fire, and how the fire swept through the lifeboats and how . . .

His guts heaved and he vomited over the man beside him in the sea.

Even when Smith knew *Perth* was sinking he was still a product of his long naval training. The average man thought instinctively of himself. But Smith thought, What needs doing before I go over the side? He went aft to the depth charges, pulled the primers out, put the keys in and made them safe. He felt glad now because he knew that if he had not done this the charges, which were set for different depths, would have exploded as *Perth* was going to the bottom and killed every man in the water. Gen-



erally, depth charges are not at the ready at night, but Captain Waller had ordered them to be kept ready. Smith had wondered why at the time.

Then he remembered the radio direction finder, near the torpedo space, which he had orders to destroy in an emergency. He found a hammer among the torpedo tools and beat the R.D.F. apparatus into scrap.

Then, for the first time, he thought of Len Smith. *Perth* was well down by the bows as he walked to the stern and sat on the rail. Will I keep my boots on? he asked himself as he listened to the propellers still churning, and the answer was, Keep them on. There's coral along this coast and you'll need them, and your knife. He never had a doubt that he would live to remember Sunda.

As *Perth's* stern lifted higher, he said aloud, "You'd better go now, Lennie boy." He saw a Carley float and dropped almost onto it and climbed aboard where John Deegan, an A.B., and Davis, his torpedo gunner's mate, welcomed him.

They picked up twenty others as they drifted closer to the Java coast—so close that when they saw Japanese landing craft, in the light of a searchlight, going in to invade, Smith warned, "We'd better get out of this, boys, or we'll be in trouble."

They started to paddle away from the land, but the float kept turning—turning in crazy circles—like a dodgem car at a fun fair.

Davis was terrified only once during the action—right at the end when he saw his shipmates going over the side and remembered he could not swim. He was wearing his Mae.

West, but was afraid it would not hold him up. Frantically, he searched for a lifebuoy, but could not find one, and then, with surprised discovery, he said to himself, Don't be a fool. You can't swim more than a few yards, but you can float longer than the best swimmer can swim. You've often done it in the baths at home. He remembered the test at Garden Island, Sydney, years before when he had to swim fifty yards fully dressed, but without his boots, then float for three minutes. He had only just been able to dog-paddle the distance and then, exhausted, had turned on his back, put his arms at his sides, and floated—and gone to sleep. He had still been floating, still asleep, when the instructor discovered him a long time later and yelled, "Get to hell out of that water, you flaming seal." Remembering this he climbed the rail near the quarter-deck on the port-side and tensed himself to jump.

His next memory was of lying two feet from the opposite rail on the high starboard side covered in belts of pom-pom ammunition and strips of twisted metal.

Good God, he thought, another torpedo must have got me!

In those moments he knew exactly what to do, but they were his only lucid moments for days. He pushed the belts and wreckage aside and tried to rise, but his right leg was useless. Cautiously, he felt the leg from the thigh down, and his fingers and a stab of pain told him it was smashed below the knee. The ship lurched then and he said aloud, "You'll have to leave in a hurry." He dragged himself to the side, dragged himself through the rail and fell into the sea, and saw a paddle waving above him and grabbed it and felt arms grip him.

All that night and part of the next day, as the cloud drifts in his mind lifted and closed in, he remembered pain and thought someone was twisting his leg. He didn't know then that the sea was slopping against his fracture as he slumped on the side of the raft with his legs in the water.

Campbell's earphones to gunnery control clicked and went dead. He took them off and heard men on the deck below bawling "Abandon ship!"

"Hell," Findlay said, "I've left my Mae West in my locker!"

"Then you'd better go after it," Campbell advised.

As he climbed down from his gun position he blew into his own Mae and then, very carefully, and almost reverently, placed his beloved tin hat on the quarter-deck. He didn't drop it or throw it down. He placed it gently on the deck, and then didn't want to leave it. He had worn it in H.M.A.S. *Hobart* during a bombardment of Italian Somaliland, and again in H.M.A.S. *Canberra* off East Africa when they found the two supply ships of the Nazi pocket battleship *Admiral von Scheer*. This hat was the one thing he had always promised himself he would bring home from the war, and now he had to leave it, and he felt like saying good-by to an old friend.

From below came the grinding, tearing sounds of things shifting, sliding as the ship heeled. He went to the stern and looked over and heard the screws and said aloud, "Not for you, old son," and walked back to near "Y" turret where he straddled the rail and peered down. The swim ahead didn't worry him; he had covered two miles in the

sea when at school in Melbourne and was confident he could double that distance if he had to. But he had never been able to dive or even jump from a high tower, yet now, as the same horror of height came to him, he thought, It's now or never.

Then he was falling, falling through endless space, and when he was conscious again he was floating and noticed *Houston* way ahead of him still firing, and heard shouts and saw a raft. He started to swim, but felt like a fish with a damaged fin, and knew two things had happened to him. His shoes and socks had been blown off by the torpedo blast that had knocked him overboard. And his leg was broken.

"No, no—please not that," he pleaded.

He reached under water. His left foot flopped in his hand. His throat tightened and he thought he would choke.

"I haven't a chance now," he whispered. "I'll die in the water."

Then he saw Frank Watson, a petty officer, floating near him, and called, "My leg's broken," and Watson called back, "Don't be bloody silly." But when Watson felt the break just above the ankle he said, "Sorry, but hang on. I'll blow more air into your blimp—and then we'll get you onto that raft."

But they were both only just on the raft when a Japanese destroyer passed at speed. Her bow waves were like slices of spongecake. Her wash tipped them off. In the water again, Campbell thought, calmly now, I'll be a handicap to the others. I might as well drown. And then a small voice argued, You've been unlucky so far. Hang on a bit



and your luck will change. He swam, trailing his smashed leg, to another raft where Bob Collins, an A.B., asked, "What's wrong?" and Campbell told him. "Okay," Collins said, "let's see if I can help it."

He dived in, collected driftwood, split it with his knife, cut off one leg of Campbell's overalls, tore the material in strips, and splinted the broken leg. When this was done, Campbell looked at his leg and then at Collins and felt like crying. He held out his hand. The A.B. gripped it and said, "We'll get you through."

For the first time Campbell felt that luck was turning his way. But then he saw something which made him chill and weak. Two big shark fins were circling a box not ten yards away. He shivered, groping for memory of words he had once read about the sharks of Sunda Strait, and finding the words and hearing a man on a raft call, "What's that there?"

"Porpoises," Campbell said.

"They look funny to me."

"Sharks," Campbell whispered to Collins who nodded.

"We'd better tell 'em."

"Pull your legs in," Campbell said to the others, "they're sharks."

The men jerked up their legs and nearly upset the raft. Everyone watched, still suspended above a new kind of death in a sort of hideous anesthesia of frozen bodies and terrified eyes. The sharks circled—once, twice. One of the fins disappeared, there was a thrashing swirl, and the box disappeared. Then the pieces came to the surface and floated away—and slowly the other fin sank and was seen no more.

And a voice in the dark said, "If any of youse blokes

see me in the Bondi surf after the war youse can kick my arse."

"Outside," Stening ordered his men, and waved his arms upward.

"Where do we go?" a youngster said.

Stening pointed. "There's a hatch right outside, and the quarter-deck hatch is on the next flat."

They ran from the wardroom and climbed the nearest ladder. As they climbed, Stening hurried to his cabin to get a block of chocolate he kept there for an emergency like this, but his cabin was a ruin of crumpled steel and splintered wood. Back in the quarter-deck lobby he saw the dogs of a hatch being turned from below. He jumped to the hatch, loosened the dogs and let three men out and followed them up the ladder, but just before he reached the deck he remembered the torch he was carrying and threw it away as now useless. On deck at last he saw men milling in the moonlight like cattle about to stampede. He climbed the ladder to the 4-inch-gun deck and tried to reach his abandon-ship station forward, but when heaps of wreckage blocked him he returned to the quarter-deck. It was now bare as a washed plate, though he had left it only a minute or two before, and all around him the silence was like sound. Then something inside the ship rolled and crashed. He ran to the stern, blew into his Mae, and was about to vault over when another torpedo struck. The rail reared and smashed his nose. He jerked into the air and fell on his back. Then water poured down and across the deck and washed him overboard. He doesn't remember the torpedo wave, or his fall to the sea, though others do, but

as he broke surface he saw the ship, gigantic it seemed, above him, and thought it was rolling over on him. He yelled and yelled and tried to paddle away. Chief Petty Officer Kiesey heard him, saw a blond head in the water, grabbed the hair and pulled him aboard the copper painter's punt he was on.

Stening, with a fractured skull, a broken nose, and an injured eye and knee, was shocked and silly. He stared wildly at Kiesey and yelled again because he thought the sinking ship was going to crush him. Then he jumped off the punt. Three times he jumped and three times the C.P.O. grabbed him and pulled him from the water. The third time Kiesey pulled him in he had to quieten him with a punch on the chin.

Later, Stening held out a paddle to Bill Davis in the water, and helped pull him onto the punt—but he doesn't remember that. Nor did he know at that time that the three other men on the punt with him were all badly injured. Kiesey's back had been burned by flash. Davis had a broken leg. And Leading Seaman Ben Talbot had a smashed collarbone, cracked ribs, and other injuries.

In "Y" turret a gunner bellowed "Abandon ship," and below in the lobby Gosden forgot about the rising water and remembered the five men in the shell room underneath him. He grabbed the phone to the shell room. It was dead. He rang the bell signal to the shell room. He got no reply. He yelled down the hoist to the shell room. There was no answer.

I must let them know, he thought, I must, I must. I can't let them die there like rats.

He waded across the flooding lobby and tried to open the door which led to a passage and the shell-room hatch. The door was jammed. There was nothing more he could do—except look at the water and want to be sick.

His two assistants had already gone up the ladder through the motor room and up again into the turret itself and out to the deck. Now he followed them.

On deck at last a searchlight blinded him. Then it swung away and he remembered his watch and £100 in notes in his locker, but decided they could stay there. He saw Alfie Coyne and with him tossed pilgrim rafts overboard, as though they were empty fruit cases, and recalled that at Tanjong four men had been needed to carry each of these heavy rafts aboard.

And then a torpedo hit. He went up, up, up—so high that he was above the top of "Y" turret. He felt extraordinarily light, and almost gay, in that mad moment. He wanted to sing and dance on the air. Then, as he fell, the torpedo wave swept across the deck and tumbled him over and over into the sea.

He went down, down. He opened his eyes against pressing blackness, like a hood over his head, but through the blackness he could see his mother crying as she opened a telegram reporting his death in action. He could see the typed words on the telegram. He felt he could touch his mother's face. Then he shot to the surface and shook the water from his eyes and saw *Perth's* stern, clear and high, against the moon.

Near him a man called, "Help, I can't swim," but Gosden lay back in the water and laughed as the sailor swam to-



ward him and passed him doing the finest crawl stroke he had ever seen.

If he can't swim, Gosden thought, then I'm done for.

He felt carefree now. He began to swim, but he was heavy and sluggish and realized he still had his boots on. He trod water and argued with himself. Would he get rid of them? Then he thought of the walking he would have to do when he got ashore, and decided to keep them. He began swimming again and found a Carley and got on board with Lieutenant-Commander Clarke and the R.A.A.F. corporal, Bradshaw. Later they picked up a man whose right leg was gone at the thigh. He was unconscious as they laid him across the float, and he died in twenty minutes. Then, as the float became more and more crowded, and as space was needed for the living, they slipped the body back into the warm sea.

In perhaps an hour a Japanese destroyer came alongside and tossed them ropes.

"Come aboard," a Jap shouted in English.

But Gosden and the others pushed the float away from the destroyer, and one of the boys yelled, "You know where to stick it, mug—we'd rather drown."

"So," the Jap yelled back. "You say Nippon no bloody good. You wait till tomorrow."

The destroyer went away. Later Gosden felt someone grabbing at his legs and trying to get onto the float. He looked down and saw a Japanese soldier. He was so surprised he nearly fell off the float. The soldier, as far as he could see, was wearing full equipment. He even had his rifle slung around him. Then Gosden saw other Jap sol-

diers in the water, their rifle barrels like periscopes. Some of the soldiers were swimming, some were floating, already drowned.

The Jap beside the float looked up and spoke. Gosden didn't understand—and didn't care. Japs and pity did not go together. He put his boots on the flat face and pushed. The Jap clutched his boots, but Gosden jerked free and kicked at the face again and again. Around him now others on the float kicked out and splashed every time a Jap soldier tried to approach. At every kick a sailor snarled, "You killed my mate, you bastards, you killed my mate." Soon the Japs kept away or the current took them away. Soon the sea around the drifting float was empty except for the untidy bundles that were the drowned.

As Owen dived overboard he realized he had forgotten to inflate his Mae. He trod water and bent his head and tried to blow into the valve, but every time he tried he went under. In disgust, he pulled off his blimp, and then his shirt and shorts, and let them float away. Then he emptied his bowels—an act which pleased him—and for the first time was conscious of the water, warm and silky and soothing against his body, and black as the inside of a cupboard.

He began to move away from the slow-moving *Perth*, and ahead could see a long low line of fire that he knew was *Houston* burning, and from the fire leaped sparks that were guns still in action. He wanted to call for help, but could not make a sound. The small inner voice of pride prevented him. It said, Stand on your own feet, and then he smiled and thought, What a ridiculous idea with fifty fathoms of water under me! But later—much later—he heard move-

ment near him and asked, almost apologetically, "Is anyone there?" and someone called, "Swim over here, mate." He joined three men holding to small pieces of driftwood, and hung on with them while he got his wind. Then a wavelet slapped against his face and he took in a mouthful. It was hot and salty and thick and he knew immediately it was blood. He spat.

"Who's wounded?"

The man beside him spoke slowly and thickly. "Is that you, Polo?"

He knew it was Lieutenant McWilliam, and said, "Are you hurt, David?"

McWilliam didn't speak for some minutes. Then he said, "I don't think I'll live much longer, Polo."

"You'll be all right, David," Owen said, but he knew the words were meaningless. "Hang on, old boy."

Later, as they drifted among some Carleys, Owen got a mouthful of oil and began to vomit, and when the sickness eased he called to one of the floats and asked if they would take McWilliam aboard.

"Go to hell," a sailor said. "We're full."

But someone on another float called, "Sure, bring him over here. We'll make room for him."

They lifted McWilliam aboard, and Owen, before he pushed off, called, "Cheerio, David, you'll be all right now."

Soon he and Tyrell, a P.O., found a wood and metal recreation seat, which had been on *Perth's* deck, and they hung to it. It floated with the metal back down, but held them up.

"What do you reckon our chances are?" Tyrell asked.

"We'll be all right—once we hit the beach."

Men on a raft were singing now, and farther off one man was singing "Matilda," and Owen could see the profile of Java against the sky. He felt happy—strangely happy and confident. He locked his arms across the recreation seat and felt the warm sea caressing his naked body, and a gentle peace, as soft as a woman's body, enfolding him.

He slept.

"God, you know what's going to happen, I don't." Gillan prayed as he followed Reece and Tuersley up the stokehold ladders. The ladders were almost horizontal now, and he realized, with surprise mixed with a still sort of horror, that the ship was nearly on her side.

A stoker lost his grip and fell past Reece and Tuersley, but Gillan managed to grab the man's overalls and steady him till he could start climbing again. Then the fans stopped and the only sound Gillan heard was a silent singing sound deep in his ears, and the only thing he felt was the ship sliding away beneath his feet.

When the four men reached the air lock at the entrance to the stokehold, Gillan saw that they were standing on one wall of this pressure room, and that the steel door had now become the roof. The stoker was trying to open it.

"It won't move," he yelled.

"Let's all push," Gillan said.

They heaved at the thick steel door and it began to move—up, up, until it fell aside with a crash and they pulled themselves up and through into the alleyway. Gillan now saw that the true floor of the alley had become a wall, and that they were standing on the opposite wall which had become the floor, so that the overhead lights were now



burning beside them instead of above them. They all knew there was a manhole farther aft, which led into the enclosed torpedo space below the 4-inch-gun deck. They hurried along the alley, and ahead saw the other stokers climbing through. And then they stopped and looked blankly at one another.

"Hell!" Reece said in alarm.

With the ship on her side, an across-ship alleyway had now become a deep well five feet wide between them and the escape manhole.

"We'll have to jump across," Gillan said.

The lights flickered, but stayed on.

The stoker he had saved in the stokehold was first. The man jumped, but his boots slipped as he was taking off and he fell screaming into the well. The other three looked down into the awful blackness and yelled. There was no answer.

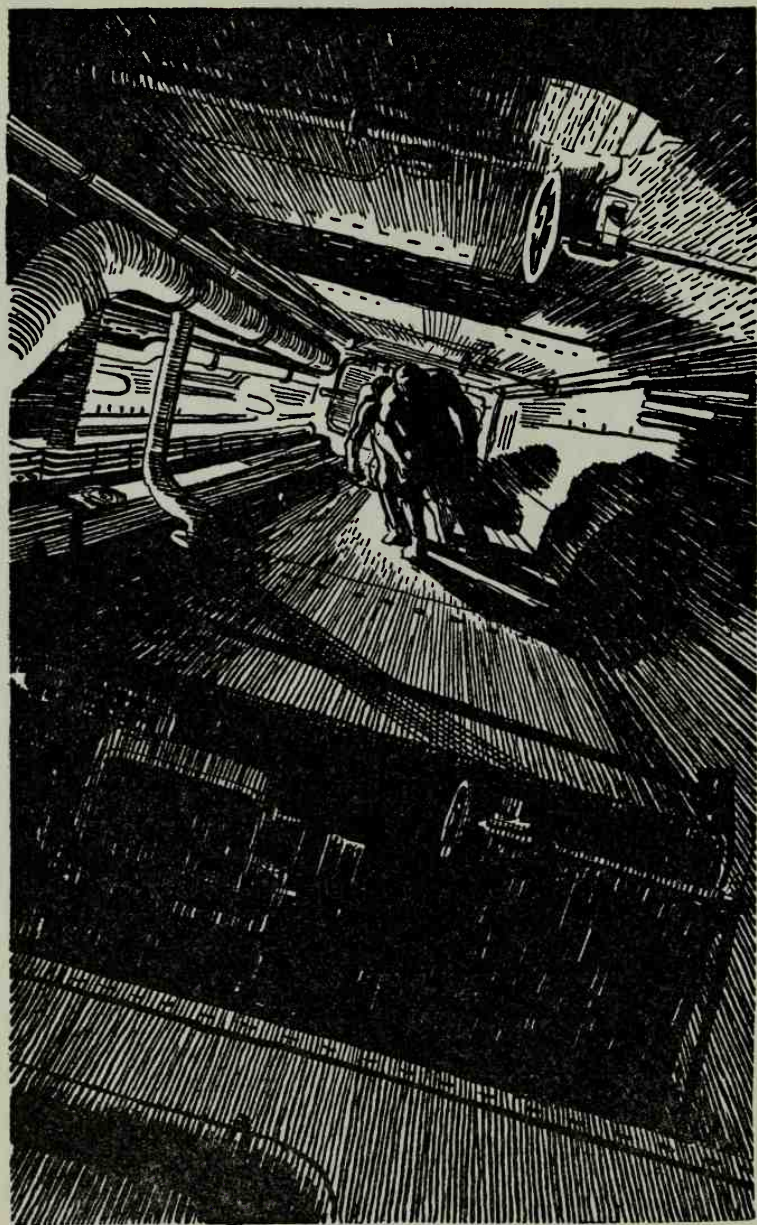
"Oh, God," Reese said.

Reece and Tuersley jumped and ran forward. As Gillan followed he saw water start coming through the manhole, and saw Reece and Tuersley get through, and then water came through the manhole in a spout like a thick green tube.

The lights went out.

For a split second Gillan could not move. Terror anchored him. Then, with the picture of the spouting manhole still before his eyes in the blackness, he dashed those last few yards, took a deep breath, and forced himself against the water and through the manhole.

Most other men would have panicked and drowned inside that ship which was at that moment nearly under



water. But Gillan kept his head. In those few seconds after he had pushed through the manhole he reasoned this way: He knew that *Perth* had now turned almost turtle, and that he was not only inside her and under water, but virtually underneath her; he knew also that she must have been badly battered, that there would be wreckage about everywhere, and that if he struggled or tried to force himself anywhere he would get caught in ropes and twisted steel and drown; he knew the ship was sliding to the bottom bow first, that this forward movement would be displacing water, and that the displaced water would be flowing backward. He decided in those seconds, or split seconds, of trapped underwater reasoning, that he had one chance, and only one, of living—to float free and unresisting and to let the water itself wash him out of the ship.

He tucked himself into a ball, his knees and chin almost meeting, and let the backward-moving water roll him over and over inside that sinking ship; and as he rolled he thought, Thank God my Mae isn't fully inflated! I'd be up against the roof if it was and would never get out. He brushed against ropes, bumped into wreckage, but rolled on.

At last he hit the ship's rail and knew he was out of the enclosed torpedo space and on the submerged deck. And then he nearly drowned. The cord of the miner's lamp he was wearing on his cap became tangled in the rail wires and floating ropes. But instead of panicking, he pulled off his cap, which the water had not dislodged, broke the cord which led to a battery in his hip pocket, pulled out the battery and dropped it, and wriggled through the rails.

There the current grabbed him, as though it had hands,



turned him over and over, pushed him upward, and then pushed him downward. As he went down he thought, This is like being on the big dipper at Luna Park. Then he was in a whirlpool, because he spun like a propeller, sometimes head down, sometimes feet down, and his heart was hammering and his ears were hammering and he saw scarlet, green and purple lights flicking on and off.

Suddenly the hammering ceased and everything was still. He was still within himself, and around him was stillness, and everything was stillness, and he felt peaceful and happy and never wanted to move again. And yet at that moment he thought, If I don't struggle now I'll drown.

He began to fight his way upward, to claw his way upward, like trying to climb a ladder made of treacle. He dog-paddled upward, clutching and snatching and pulling down at the water, fighting to get away from this underwater world of incredible peace and quiet he got into where the stillness was like a charm, soft, beautiful and insidious, and where he wanted to lie back and rest and rest and rest forever.

And then, with a rush like falling upward, he catapulted up and broke surface through two inches of oil and saw a biscuit tin and grabbed it with both arms. And as he hung there on the surface of the water, gulping air, he saw, thirty yards away, the tip of one of *Perth's* propeller blades sinking into the sea.

A long 18-inch plank bumped into him, and he crawled onto it and sat on it, and past him floated a white solar topee, bobbing up and down, up and down, as though someone was walking jauntily underneath it. He thought, The sun's going to be hot tomorrow—I'll need you. So he



grabbed the topee and put it on his oil-covered head, and it fitted.

Then he looked up at the stars, the brilliant clusters of stars, and spoke to them aloud.

"I'm the last man out of that ship alive," he said. "God, I thank you."



Sunday: 12:25 A.M.

**P**ERTH WENT DOWN AT 12:25 A.M. ON MARCH 1, 1942, two and a half miles off St. Nicolas Point, the extreme northwest tip of the 600-miles-long island of Java, and at the entrance to Sunda Strait.

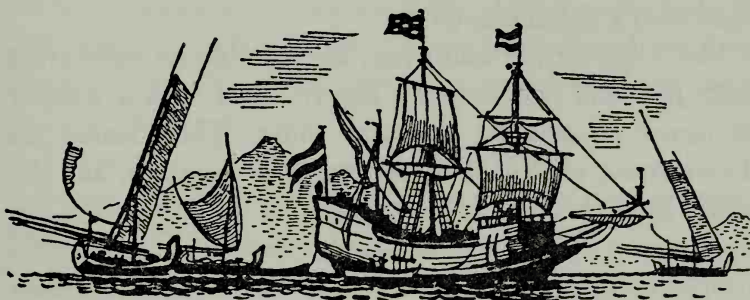
If you look at a map you will see that Sunda Strait, which is like a big funnel, separates the islands of Java and Sumatra. It is only fourteen miles wide at its narrowest, then gradually broadens to the southwest until it merges with the Indian Ocean roughly on a line between Flat Cape on Sumatra and Java Head on Java.

Geologists tell us that aeons ago Java and Sumatra were one, but a volcano, or string of volcanoes, in the middle of what is today Sunda Strait, erupted, blew its mountain chain to pieces, separated Java and Sumatra, and created the narrow strait.

That was 'way back in geological time, but for many centuries Sunda was one of the world's most celebrated

passageways and trade routes between Asia and Europe, and on old maps it was a dividing line between Asia and what early geographers called Polynesia or what we call the Pacific.

In ancient times the Chinese used it as a trade route to India, the Persian Gulf and beyond. Cook came this way, and Tasman and many other explorers of the Pacific, and so did the China clippers, racing for the English Channel and home. You will find Sunda mentioned on rice paper



and parchment and in many a yellowing journal, and many a sailor knew Java Head better than his next village.

Sunda, too, was a famous happy hunting ground of pirates. The Moros, particularly, of the Sulu Islands, used it into the nineteenth century, working with fleets of a hundred ships and more—some like the galleys of Roman times with decks of sweating rowers chained to their seats and thrashed as they swung back and forth at their long sweeps to the drumbeats of the timekeeper.

But Sunda in our day was the narrow laneway where many hundreds of Australians, Americans and Japanese were to die in that dark battle of February 28-March 1,

1942, and in the hours which followed. Yet, to understand why so many died in the sea, after surviving the battle and escaping from sinking ships, you need to know just a little more about the famous strait and the waters that flow there.

Three islands in Sunda Strait, and two particularly, play an important part in this history of human suffering and human survival.

In the narrowest part of the strait, six miles southwest of St. Nicolas Point, and only four miles off the Java coast, is Toppers Island or Toppers Light, little more than an arid rock with a lighthouse on it.

Five miles farther southwest, and roughly six miles from both Java and Sumatra, is a bigger island with a number of names all meaning the same thing. These names are Thwartway, or Dwars in den weg, or Sangiang, and the island is, as its name implies, "right in the middle" of the narrow part of Sunda. The island is mostly flat, with palm-fringed beaches and coral reefs, and supports a few Sundanese villages and plantations.

The third island is Krakatoa, the notorious volcano island twenty-five miles southwest again from Sangiang. It is the last big island in the main channel before Sunda Strait finally broadens into the open ocean.

The last eruption of Krakatoa was in 1883, when it caused an international stir. The eruption blew the island to pieces; sent dust and ash seventeen miles into the air and right round the world; sent a sound wave which people heard at Rodriguez, at Bangkok, in Ceylon and in Western and South Australia; started a sea wave which drowned 36,000 people on Java and Sumatra and adjacent islands,



and then went on to reach Cape Horn and the English Channel, 11,000 miles away, as a minute wavelet.

When the men of *Perth* and *Houston*—on floats and rafts, and clinging precariously to wreckage—began their battle for life in the sea, they all looked to the Java coast, which they could see in the moonlight, and aimed to reach it. What they did not know at first was that a one-way current sweeps perpetually through Sunda Strait from the enclosed Java Sea to the Indian Ocean, swirling round the islands in its path, creating whirlpools and rips and small areas of curious and deceptive calm. This was the malevolent current which took most of the men away from Java, the nearest land—took strength from some, hope from some, and life itself from many.

Toppers . . . Sangiang . . . blue Krakatoa.

These were the islands the men saw as the current swept them through the strait.

These were the islands of salvation or despair for the men who survived and the men who died in the swift waters of Sunda on that Sunday of March 1, 1942.



## Sunday: Dawn

THE NIGHT BEGAN TO FADE. THE JAVA COAST came down to meet the sea not half a mile away. The mountains inland turned their profiles to the paling sky.

In the first light the waters of Sunda were gray, and the faces of the men in the Carley were gray, and, fifty yards away, as the light strengthened, was a waterlogged lifeboat, a Japanese lifeboat, waiting. And it was gray.

"Boys, this looks better," Len Smith said.

The men lifted their heads and looked about them. Their eyes were swollen and bloodshot. The stubble on their faces in the morning light and their weariness made even the youngsters look old. Then they saw the lifeboat and a movement, hardly seen, rippled across them. A man long-hawked and spat. Another, naked, rumbled against the tight canvas of the Carley. The rumble ended in a thin

squeak and a sailor sniggered. A third picked up his paddle and yawned and said, "The last time I felt like this was after a night out on rum and beer."

Slowly he dipped, and others picked up their paddles and dipped, and others used their hands, and the float, spinning at times but always getting closer, edged toward the lifeboat.

They bailed her with a bucket tied to a seat. They plugged some of the shell holes in her with seaweed and bits of floating wood. They found a mast and sail and put them up as the sun lifted over the Java mountains. And about breakfast time, but with no breakfast, a breeze just filled the sail and they left the Carley float behind.

"I don't know what you blokes think," Smith said, holding the tiller, "but I reckon we ought to make for Sumatra. We're too close to the Nips to be healthy."

"That's right," someone said, "let's get clear of the bastards. Then we can start thinking what to do."

"What about Australia?" another suggested, but without conviction.

Smith shook his head. "We wouldn't have much of a chance in this. She's holed. And we've got no food or water."

And so it was agreed.

They crossed Sunda Strait slowly in the light breeze, and near Sumatra saw three destroyers—two moving north and another farther out in the strait making south. But the Japs ignored them, and they turned the boat toward the Indian Ocean thinking they would escape.

About an hour later one of the northern destroyers turned back, and they soon realized it was coming after them. It

swung toward them and was soon close enough for the captain on the bridge to call in English, "Follow me."

"This is it at last," one of the men said. "Now the floggin' torture's on."

For the first time then Smith's calm deserted him. He felt jittery. He could not concentrate on what he was doing. He could not think. And the reason was not the Japanese—he had more or less been expecting them—but the dozens of black spots, a little like Chinese coolie hats, floating on the water perhaps two hundred yards away, but scattered over a big area. He couldn't tell what they were, and this worried him and he thought, What's the matter with me? Am I imagining things? Am I ill? He had seen the black spots earlier and thought they were wreckage. Now he knew they were not wreckage, and yet . . . Suddenly he realized that the coolie hats were men—men from *Perth* and perhaps from *Houston*—his own men, black with oil, swimming. He pointed excitedly. "Look at the blokes still in the water."

But a call from the Japanese captain dragged all eyes away from the swimmers.

"Come alongside me," he ordered.

For a mad moment Smith felt like yelling back, "Go to hell," and turning the boat toward the men in the water. Then he realized he had no choice and swung the tiller.

"Who's in charge?" the Jap called when they were alongside the destroyer. "Is there an officer there?"

Smith, who had earlier ripped off his shoulder tabs, had already warned his men that if the Japs picked them up there were no officers or men with other rank among them.



But a youngster lost his head and pointed at Smith and said, like a schoolboy, "He's one." The Jap beckoned.

The captain was friendly. He was slim, with almost European eyes, and his English was faultless. He took Smith's sheath knife, hesitated and said, "I suppose you'd like to keep this," and handed it back. Then he explained: "I want you to take charge of rescue work. You'll record the names of everyone you bring aboard. You'll also see that the men take off their oil-covered uniforms, and that nobody moves forward of the torpedo tubes." He gave Smith a notebook and pencil, two bottles of beer and a bag of biscuits, and told him to start rescue work.

Smith, still surprised at the polite reception, went to the rail and called to his mates. "Get out the oars and start picking up the boys. And tell them they have to take off their clothes when they get on deck."

An hour later, when 223 survivors were aboard—some swam to the destroyer—a Dutch plane came over and the captain sent Smith this written message: "I am sorry, but I will have to abandon rescue operations. Hostile aircraft. But the Japanese Navy will attend to further survivors."

The destroyer opened her engines and steamed north, and from her deck Smith and the others watched the lifeboat get smaller and smaller and thought about the men in her and the men still in the water and wondered whether they would survive.

The night of misery in the whispering sea was nearly over. In the early grayness Woods could see two more rafts packed with men, and knew he had been in the water

about five hours. Five shadowy hours they had been with no clear memories except the dull pain in his arms as he hung on, men singing, endless argument about a light which seemed to advance and recede like a will-o'-the-wisp, the ever-present nauseating taste and smell of oil. He remembered, too, taking off his shoes some time in the night, but his blimp was gone, and that was something he could not explain.



Feeling, tasting, he thought, This isn't the sea. It's like being in a swift and evil river, with banks I can't climb, taking me to some terrible place I'll never escape from.

As night retreated he could see that everyone was thick-coated with oil, and eyes were scarlet with oil burn and irritation. His own eyes itched and burned, and the burning became worse as the sun lifted and the early morning glare bounced off the water and stabbed at them.

On the nearest raft Woods saw Ernie Kynvin, a P.O. plumber he had known on Garden Island, Sydney. He swam across and shook hands.

"This is a nice bloody mess to be in," he said.

"Well, you always wanted to go to sea—what d'you think of it now?"

They talked of the time they had been together in the chippy shop at the Island, when they made a key for Woods's twin sister for her twenty-first birthday and smuggled it through the dockyard police when it was still covered in wet gold paint. They talked to keep their minds off their chances of dying in the sea, and near them in the water two men argued endlessly whether Phar Lap could have beaten Peter Pan, and another man was whistling, and another hung to the raft, his eyes half closed, his mouth sagging, exhausted.

The current swung the raft toward Sangiang and Woods said, "Do you feel like having a swim?" and Kynvin shook his head.

"Not me—but you give it a go."

The island beach looked about two hundred yards away as Woods started for it, but the current spun him round and pulled him under and then let him go. He came up fifty yards away and felt the current tugging at him again and sucking him down. He swam away from the whirling water and back to the raft where Ernie grabbed him and held him till he got his wind.

"I'm glad I didn't try," Ernie said.

"Thanks," Woods said at last. "I couldn't have made it. It was like swimming in rapids. I'd have drowned if I'd gone on."

The current swept their raft away from the island and around the yellow beaches, and then the island was astern.

Later, when he was very tired, a heavy dragging sort of tiredness he had never known before, Woods saw the Jap

destroyer and Smith's boat, and the men on the raft began to paddle with their hands and the men hanging onto the raft to kick with every bit of strength they had left. Woods waited until they were close to the destroyer, then he struck out and grabbed a steel ladder aft and half crawled, half climbed to the deck. And there his knees felt like melting rubber and would not hold him.

Lyons and Stokan stayed together, swimming a little, floating a lot, and letting themselves ride with the current. They went through fine rain like spider web brushing their faces. They passed a crowd, including Martin, the commander, hanging to a boom and singing, "It's a Lovely Day Tomorrow." They drifted towards Toppers Light and tried to reach the island, but missed by a hundred yards and swam to a raft and hung on. The light on the island faded behind them, and a man on the raft began to sing, "I'd Like to Ride a Ferry."

John Harper, the navigator, was on this raft. He saw Lyons and called, "Did you lock the plot, Schoolmaster Lyons?" and Lyons waved, "Everything secured, sir."

He hung on, sometimes with one hand, sometimes with both, and occasionally he let go and trod water to relieve the pain in his hands and his forearms. Above him a man kept calling, "Get off my leg . . . get off my leg," in a slow, desperate sort of monotone. Every call at first was like a slap in Lyons' face. He felt so helpless, and yet, as the calling continued, so indifferent to these pleas from delirium. He began to notice, in himself and others, that suffering had now become so commonplace, so much a part of



these hours in the water, that men thought only of themselves and their battle to live.

Before dawn the man died, and the others on the crowded raft rolled the body off. A leg broke from the body as it went into the sea. The body disappeared but the leg floated. It floated just astern of the raft for half an hour, bobbing gently, black with oil. And then it, too, disappeared.

That leg almost hypnotized Lyons. He couldn't take his eyes from it, though he felt no horror. As he watched it bobbing and rolling, he became drowsy and desperately wanted to sleep. When it disappeared, he put his head on his arms and was nearly asleep when he heard George Ross, a commissioned gunner, say, "I'll hold you while you have a rest." The voice was like a whisper across a room. And then he thought, I was wrong about people thinking only of themselves, and when he woke it was dawn and Sangiang was right in their path. He could see a native hut, and the drooping leaves of palms and banana clumps, and a sailor in the water near him said, "It's floggin' paradise."

"Let's go ahead," Percy Stokan said, but Lyons shook his head. "I couldn't hold a beer if you gave me one."

Stokan, who had been with him all night, now let go and began to swim toward Sangiang, and as he swam he called back, "I'll have breakfast ready when you get there, and in three weeks time we'll have a pot at the First and Last."

And that was the last Lyons ever saw of him.

Swiftly the raft swung down on Sangiang, and when it was very close Lyons thought, I must make it, and began to swim. But the current swept him out and past the island, and then in the dim distance, blue and high, he saw another island he knew from his charts must be Krakatoa—his last

hope. Yet he was no longer tired and felt he could swim for another day. He decided that nothing would prevent him getting ashore on Krakatoa. He reasoned that if he let the current take him, and if he swam each hour for five minutes westward, he would defeat the current and be able to make a landfall.

And at the moment of that decision he saw the Japanese destroyer and the lifeboat near it. He trod water and thumbed his nose at Krakatoa and began to sing.

Stening's night on the copper punt was memory of shadowy forms and sounds he could not interpret and a light that seemed to slide across his eyes. But at dawn, when the punt had gathered a tail of men clinging to a spar, he was conscious. He slipped into the water to let an exhausted man take his place, but later, when someone else offered him a place on the punt, he was so weak he could not pull himself aboard. Only then did he notice that his Mae had a hole in it and was useless.

Hanging there, he saw a sun helmet drift by, and on the helmet was a small pink crab kneading the air with its pink claws, and he thought of himself at the bottom of the sea, where millions of crabs like the pink one were tearing at his body and picking at his bones, and he was sick.

Then they were drifting down on Sangiang and Kiesey called, "We'll hit it dead center." Ten of the men, including Ronald Bevington, one of the two chaplains from *Perth*, began to swim, and Stening thought, They'll drown, and most of them did.

The punt missed the island, and now he knew he was almost at the end of his strength. He thought, I can't hang

on any longer. It will be pleasant to sink under the oil and sleep. The word sleep was like a soft and melodious gong beating inside his head, and he said to himself, Now I'll let go and sink and sink, and someone yelled, "Here's a ship."

"Ship." The word crashed against his injured head like gunfire. He no longer wanted to die. In those miraculous seconds he was strong again, but while the others climbed the ladder to the Japanese destroyer's deck, he could not even pull himself from the water, and neither could Bill Davis who, still only semiconscious and almost helpless, slumped half on and half off the punt.

Surely I'm not going to miss out now, Stening thought.

And then he saw a life buoy coming down to them on a rope. He was calm as he watched it coming closer. He knew he would live if he didn't panic. He watched, fascinated, as Davis, also struggling to survive, got his head and shoulders through the buoy and was pulled up. Then the buoy came down again to Stening. With the last of his strength, he put his arms through it and hung there and felt himself lifted like a sack to the deck where men grabbed him and lowered him to the iron plating. And the first person he saw was Davis—Davis standing, with the bones of his broken leg protruding through the skin—and he remembered he was a doctor and said to himself, The silly blighter. It was a simple fracture before. Now he's given himself a compound.

And Stening was right.

But Davis couldn't help it. The men who had pulled him aboard had lowered him onto the iron deck and, naked, he had begun to fry there. The blistering heat against his back had brought him back to consciousness and to save

himself from cooking he had got to his feet. That was when Stening saw him. But a few seconds later Davis fell, nearly went over the side, but saved himself by grabbing the rail. Then he vomited and blacked out. The others carried him aft, and his next memory was "Maggy" Moore putting a cigarette in his mouth and lighting it for him. Fully conscious now, he sucked in the smoke and thought, This is the best smoke I've ever had in my life. And then a Japanese sailor snatched the cigarette from his mouth and tossed it overboard. And Davis blacked out again.

When first light woke Owen he did not know how long he had slept, minutes or hours. He looked at Tyrell and the two other men clinging with them to the garden seat. Their faces seemed to have shrunk, their eyes had a pathetic, sunken, hunted look. He examined the sea about the seat. It was flat and empty, except for big patches of oil like shadows from clouds.

Later, when the sun was up, they drifted against a broken pilgrim raft, but it would not hold all of them, and Owen and Tyrell decided to stay with the seat. As they split away from the others, one of the boys waved and called, "See you Toosday."

The sun lifted. The oil in Owen's eyes began to sting and burn, and his sight blurred, and his eyelashes were so stiff with oil that he felt they would snap when he touched them.

Presently the seat began to break up and he knew that in half an hour or a little longer they would be without



support. Tyrell, too, was worried. He called, "She's cracking up."

Then, as the current took them toward Toppers, they sighted a plank, about ten feet long and eight inches wide, and without a word swam to it and hung on, one at each end. Owen watched the lighthouse getting bigger and bigger, and began to imagine his feet on the ground again, but as they swept past, too far out to swim, he was suddenly so weary that he barely had the strength to hold on. And yet, as he looked along the plank, he got new courage from Tyrell's presence, from his stiff black grin, even from the shape of his head, wrapped tightly with oil-plastered hair.

They drifted down on Sangiang, toward a white beach backed with palms. The palms made Owen hungry, the beach made Tyrell want to sleep. But less than two hundred yards from the beach Owen felt a new current grip them and force them out in a half circle, and he knew they would miss the island and what that would mean.

He shouted, "Do you think we'd better swim for it?" and his companion yelled back, "No, no."

They were swinging farther out now, passing drowned men still in their life jackets, floating face up and face down and on their sides with knees drawn up as though asleep, floating bundles that had been breathing men, corpses with empty, meaningless faces resting on the soft pillow of the awful sea.

Tyrell began to mumble, to talk to himself.

"What's the matter?" Owen called.

But he got no reply and called again, and when Tyrell still ignored him he suddenly felt alone and desperate for the first time.

I can't go out this way, he thought. Please, God, spare me—let me get back to Elinor and David. Don't let me go like this.

He thought of the flat he and his wife had in Alexandria . . . the cluttered air-raid shelter below the building the night his wife was having their baby . . . the monstrous blonde French woman who carted her Pekinese down to the shelter and crooned to it between the bomb bursts. . . .

They were in open water now. Sangiang was behind, and 'way ahead the high blue haze was Krakatoa.

Tyrell was still muttering, and Owen, watching, thought, I can't last much longer. I think I'll drown. I wonder what it will be like . . . perhaps like going under an anesthetic but never waking up. . . . After all I've been through, how pleasant it will be to go down, down, down!

He let himself sink, gladly he let himself sink. The water covered his eyes, the warm water enfolded him, clasped its hands over his head. He was about to let go when the plank stabbed his chest and slammed up against his chin. He pulled his head above water and wiped a hand over his eyes and saw and felt Tyrell jerking the plank up and down.

"For God's sake don't leave me . . . for God's sake don't leave me!" Tyrell was shouting, rational now.

Owen felt humble, ashamed. He felt he had played a dirty trick and been found out. But all he could say was "Sorry."

He knew now he would not try to drown again. He knew, and it was like crossing a border into a strange country. A few minutes, a few seconds before, he had decided to die. Now he knew he would fight to live until his

strength failed. With new hope he searched the sea for a boat, a raft, anything better than the precarious plank which only just held them up, but he saw nothing except high Krakatoa, twenty miles away across the desertion of Sunda.

He looked at Tyrell and his heart started to race. The top of his head was just disappearing under the water. Frantically he waggled the plank and felt it hit the sinking head. Tyrell jerked to the surface and said, very slowly, "I couldn't help it."

And then Owen thought, This is madness—madness. My God, I can't remember ever seeing this man before—I don't even know his name!

About noon or a little later Owen thought he saw a black smudge away to the left, but decided the oil in his eyes had upset his sight. Then he saw the smudge again and said quickly, "I saw something over there."

Tyrell lifted himself a few inches higher in the sea. "Where?"

"Port of us."

"Can't see a thing—but I'll blow my whistle."

He had the whistle slung on a lanyard round his neck. He pulled it out of the water, shook it and blew, and the high shrill notes seemed to ricochet along the surface.

"It's gone now, but give her another blow."

Tyrell blew again and again. Then he edged along the plank and Owen took the whistle and blew until he was winded.

Then Tyrell shouted, "I can see it there . . . it looks like a boat . . . Christ, it is a boat!"

"Blow," Owen shouted.

"Now it's gone . . . gone . . . gone . . ."

He began to sink.

"Don't go; we'll be picked up; hang on, for God's sake hang on!"

Tyrell got his head above water, and blew the whistle again and again. He was still blowing when an Australian voice called, "For Christ's sake stop blowing that floggin' flute! We 'eard yer the first floggin' time."

Owen felt arms grip him, and then he was lying in water on the bottom boards of a boat, and Tyrell was beside him.

And then they were both asleep.

When Owen woke two hours later Ben Chaffey, *Perth's* red-bearded quartermaster, was bending over him giving him a drink from a rusty tin.

"Thanks," he said. "And thanks for picking us up."

"You were both all in."

Owen sat up and watched Chaffey and the others putting up the sails, and felt as though all the hang-overs he had ever experienced had been rolled into one—and this was it.

The boat began to move, away from Krakatoa and back toward Sangiang, which they reached in the middle afternoon. They landed at a rocky cove, carried two wounded men—both had leg wounds from shell splinters, and one also had a ripped scrotum—up the beach and put them down in the long coarse grass under the palms.

There Owen crumpled and liked the feel of the coarse grass against his naked body. He pulled up handfuls of the grass and looked at it and said, half aloud, "I'm alive, thank God, I'm alive!" And then, before he slept, he slowly



counted the hours he had been in the water. And the answer was somewhere near fifteen.

At dawn, when Gosden saw that his Carley was between two islands, Toppers and Sangiang, he tried to decide what to do. He knew by this that the current was taking them through Sunda Strait, and he reasoned that if he did not get off the float soon he would finish in the open sea. He argued that the island they were approaching was perhaps his last chance of survival, and he said to the others on the Carley, "If we stay on this we'll all go out to the ocean and die there. When we get closer I'm going to swim for it."

"You'll never make it."

"Don't be a mug."

An argument started, and Gosden turned to Ronald Bradshaw. "What about you?"

The R.A.A.F. corporal thought for a moment. "I suppose a man might as well try."

So when Sangiang was close, Gosden and Bradshaw slid into the water and began to swim.

"Take it slow," Bradshaw advised. "We'll make it."

They swam across the current and got to within fifty yards of the beach. Then an eddy separated them. It spun Gosden round and washed him almost back to where he had started. He trod water and thought, I must try again. I must . . . I must.

He was about to swim when a body floated down to him. The body was on its back with arms outstretched. He recognized Peter Nelson, the telegraphist, and then he realized with a shock that Nelson was not dead but asleep,

and actually snoring. He shouted and slapped water in his face and woke him.

"What's biting you?" Nelson said sleepily.

"This is no place to bloody well sleep—and you were snoring, too."

"I never snore," Nelson said.

"You were snoring your head off."

Nelson yawned and grinned. "A cove might as well sleep. I can't do anything else, I'm so tired."

The current separated them. Gosden waved and began his second attempt to reach the island. Once again the water whirled him away from the beach, but this time it took him round a point where there was little current and where a slow swell sent waves shoreward toward the high and indolent palms.

If I can get onto one of these shoots I'll make it, he thought.

He trod water and waited. He let a couple of waves go. Then he picked one he knew from surfing experience had some weight and run behind it, got onto it and shot to the beach, and as it dumped him in the shallows he felt small rocks and coral skin his belly—and he exulted in the sudden red tearing pain that meant blessed deliverance from the sea.

Long before dawn Burgess realized, as Gosden had, that to stay with his Carley and drift south meant only one end for him. By watching the silhouette of the Java mountains he already knew the float was sliding fast down Sunda Strait, and decided he must leave it at the first opportunity.

But he knew he could not move until dawn, and he began to plead with the sun to hurry.

He saw the fixed light of Toppers come and go and remembered from his charts that there was still another island ahead. That was the one he wanted—the one he must try to reach.

Soon after this the Carley bumped into a raft with six men, including Harper, holding to it, and to give these six a rest, Burgess and five others from the Carley took their places. In the water now, waiting anxiously for dawn, Burgess felt the skin of his hands shriveling, and even the warm sea seemed cold. The cold seeped into him until he felt waterlogged, heavy, and his anxiety increased as the current tugged them southward. Then, at dawn, they were bearing down on Sangiang, and he knew this was his chance—and his last.

"We'll have to make it," he called to the navigator, and then he noticed a big hole in Harper's ear, and blood on his face amid the oil, and added, "Did you get hurt?" and Harper felt his ear and grinned and said casually, "Must have."

They were close now and Burgess looked at his watch and had to rub the oil off the glass to see the hands. It was still going. The time was 6 A.M. He decided to go. He knew he could swim up to three miles, but he might have hesitated if he had known what was ahead of him. He waved to his companions and began to swim, and Stan Roberts, a leading seaman, and several others followed.

Soon Burgess realized that the island was farther off than he had estimated, but he swam steadily until he was close. There the current, boiling like rapids, grabbed the swim-

mers and separated them, and then Burgess was on his own, and fear of missing the island gripped his guts like pincers. An inner voice called, You'll live, son, if you fight now. He put his head down and began to crawl-stroke with every ounce of arm thrust and kick, and only later did he realize that his decision to crawl saved him. Near the island the current was whirlpooling, but his fast swim took him to the outer edge of one of the many whirlpools, and the water swung him in a wide circle toward the beach. He felt the water helping him and dipped his head again and put in another burst. Suddenly, he was in still water with coral just beneath him. He tried to stand, but fell over and gulped water as he fell. Terror swept through him and he swam until there were only a few inches of water under him. And then he dragged himself up the coral beach and vomited and vomited. But even during the sickness he felt like shouting, "I'm alive . . . I'm alive," though all his strength had gone, and for minutes he lay inert with his face on the coarse coral sand.

When at last he felt stronger and able to sit up he looked at his watch. The time was 7:35 A.M.

"Hell," he told a palm tree which bowed toward him, "that little swim took an hour and a half. I can't believe it."

He was still sitting there when Frank Nash, a leading seaman, came ashore and crawled up the beach. He had a great split in his hand clogged with oil. They gazed at each other through half-closed eyes and each raised an arm and let it drop. Then Ernie Noble, a sick-berth attendant, came in, but flopped on his face and lay, unable to move and drowning, in six inches of water. They staggered to him



and lugged him from the water and dropped him on the coral and collapsed beside him.

Gillan, astride his plank, heard cries for help, and knew it was his duty, as one alive by an act of the God he believed in, to go to the man's assistance.

"All right, I'm coming," he yelled, and paddled hard.

He found the man, who could swim only a few strokes, and got him onto the other end of the plank. Then he bumped into a Carley and a line of men hanging to a boom.

"Who's that?" someone called, and Gillan recognized the voice of Martin, the commander.

"Gillan, sir," he said. "I've got a man here who can't swim. Can he get aboard the float?"

"Yes, they'll make room for him," Martin said. "Are you coming with us?"

Gillan hesitated. Something warned him, Don't go with them—stay on your own.

"No," he replied. "I'll see if there's anyone else about first."

Then he paddled away.

For the second time that night Gillan was saved—call it by fate if you like, though Gillan's own word for it is God—for the twenty men with Commander Martin on that boom died—probably after being swept out of Sunda Strait into the Indian Ocean.

Gillan, paddling his plank, naked since he had tugged off his oil-clogged boiler suit, and worrying most of the time about sharks, was on his own until dawn, when he drifted near a Carley. Men were draped across it, hanging to it—asleep, exhausted, beaten, and covered with oil. They took

no notice of him. And then he did something which many a survivor remembers, and others still tell about when they talk of Sunda. He lifted his filthy topee in a courtly salute and said, "Good morning, gentlemen."

For a long moment nobody responded. Then a curious movement wave went through the men on and around that Carley. Slowly they raised their heads and looked at the naked man on his plank. Slowly they opened mouths stiff with oil and grinned. Then they laughed, and soon they were all laughing, those black scarecrows afloat in the middle of Sunda.

A bleary-eyed sailor bowed. "Dr. Livingstone, I presume."

Later, Gillan left his plank for a Carley, and later still boarded the lifeboat Smith had watched disappear astern from the deck of the Japanese destroyer. The boat now held about seventy men, including the dying McWilliam, Gavin Campbell, Gordon Black, Allen McDonough, "Bish" Mathieson, Claude Woodley, George Ross, Ratliff, Hawkins, and others he knew.

It was Gillan, who had done a lot of sailing, that got the mast and sails up, that made a tiller with driftwood, that headed the boat toward Sumatra. But soon the wind changed and started to blow them back across the strait. And then the rain followed them and caught up with them, angry little squalls which sounded like tearing calico as they lashed the sea.

Late in the afternoon, when they were nearing Java, Gillan handed the tiller to McDonough and said, "You'd better take over, Mac. My eyes are packing up with the oil. I can't see very well."

He didn't tell anyone that he was almost blind as he slumped on the bottom boards near Gavin Campbell who, all that day as the wind blew them across the strait, had sat in the stern with his broken leg along a seat, feeling the bones rubbing together like a nutmeg against a grater, and wondering what he would do if they ever reached shore.

Then, at nightfall, the wind died and McDonough lowered the sail.

"Come on, boys," he urged. "We'll have to pull now."

Some refused to row. Others rowed until they fell fainting or beaten into the bottom of the boat. Lowe pulled for hours, although he was full of oil and vomiting as he rowed. Men who relieved him had to push him aside and take his oar, and even then, silly with fatigue and illness, he continued to pull back and forward on an imaginary oar until someone pushed him onto the floor boards to sleep. Men bickered and snarled and cursed one another, while others lay or hung over the side like wet sails.

McDonough kept his exhausted oarsmen going by a mixture of bullying and blarney and child psychology. He saw a light, or said he did, and persuaded the rowers they hadn't far to go.

"Another three hundred yards," he'd call, "just another three hundred."

Or, "Pull, you bastards—pull and we'll be there in ten minutes."

Then McWilliam died, and a little later a stoker with a great shell gash in his side also died on the bloodied bottom boards.

The rowers stopped. The boat lost way. The living sat silent above the men just dead.

"We'd better put 'em over the side," someone suggested.

And another voice in the dark said, "Where's the Bish—he ought to hold a service?"

"But how can I bury anyone like this?" Mathieson protested. He was naked and black with oil, and near exhaustion from rowing and encouraging the others.

"That's the way you come into the world," a sailor said, "and that's the way you go out. Come on, Bish—do your stuff."

Mathieson stood, naked and filthy, and for the first time that day or night the men in the boat were still. The only sound was the sea against the boat, the soft slapping and whispering of the sea during that short and terrible service.

". . . We therefore commit his body to the deep to be turned into corruption," Mathieson concluded, "looking to the resurrection of the body, when the sea shall give up her dead, and the life of the world to come through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Then the men lifted McWilliam and the stoker and put them gently into the sea, and oars dipped again and the boat went on.

In the early hours of Monday morning the lifeboat reached the Java coast. The wounded were carried ashore and put on the sail on the coarse sand beach. Then men dropped where they stood and slept, like bundles washed up by the tide.

It was more than twenty-four hours since *Perth* had made her last dive to the bottom of Sunda Strait.





## Sunday: Afternoon

AS THE MEN CAME ABOARD THE JAPANESE DESTROYER they had to take off their oil-soaked clothes—if they had any—and toss them overboard. The captain was particular about his decks. But he sent the prisoners buckets of warm water and soft soap and kerosene to get some of the oil off their bodies, and gave Smith, after explaining that he had no doctor and no medical supplies aboard, a bottle of “Made in Birmingham” drops to treat the worst oil-burned eyes. Then the survivors were herded aft and sprayed with disinfectant from a stirrup pump like so many flies.

Each man received a bag of biscuits, a few cigarettes and a G string, and all spent the afternoon naked, only a few miles south of the Equator, on the shadeless iron deck. Even a wood deck is too hot for bare feet in the tropics, yet Davis, his broken leg beginning to fester, lay on the deck semiconscious, and Stening, his injured knee useless,

crawled under the torpedo tubes and stayed there until a Jap sailor kicked him out and Smith half carried him back to the blistering deck aft. Then Smith took off his own boots and put them on Stening.

Before they were transferred to a larger destroyer in the late afternoon, the Japanese captain called John Harper, the senior *Perth* officer, Lyons and some of the other officers forward, seated them at a table on the deck, and gave them tea and made a speech.

"Your country will be proud of you," he said, in his clipped, almost Oxford English. "You have been heroes. It is seldom that two ships have done so much damage. You need have no fear of your future, for we Japanese recognize brave people."

But later, as Smith was going over the side to the other destroyer, the captain put his hand on his arm. "You put up a good fight," he said. "I am very sorry, but now you are to be handed over to the military."

Smith had no doubt that the words were intended as both an apology and a warning.

Smith, Woods and Lyons (Stening and Davis were semi-conscious most of the time on that destroyer) and many of the others in those four years of Japanese starvation and brutality were to remember that captain almost with affection. He was both courteous and kind, and he seemed to have injected most of his crew with the best traditions of the sea.

The survivors were taken to the other Japanese destroyer at sunset in Bantam Bay. As they entered the bay, thousands of Japanese soldiers, still waiting to go ashore from troopships, waved their hats and shouted *banzai*, but the

*Perth* men counted with grim satisfaction the ruins of five ships, including a seaplane carrier and a big transport, either sunk in the shallow water or beached—victims of *Perth's* and *Houston's* guns and torpedoes the night before.

On the new destroyer Japanese treatment varied. Sailors with fixed bayonets guarded the prisoners and stabbed at anyone who attempted to move forward of a string tied across the afterdeck. One of the sailors brought a bucket of water and jeered as he splashed it on the hot deck in front of the thirsty men. Another backhanded a prisoner with his fist, and another booted a wounded man. Yet others, when they opened packets of cigarettes, offered them to the Australians.

John Harper asked for an awning for the prisoners, particularly for the wounded, but when the Japanese tried to force him back from the string by stabbing at him, he contemptuously swept the bayonets aside with both hands and walked through the astonished guards to a group of Japanese officers. He demanded an awning—and got one.

That night, 200 naked, hungry men, some of them injured and many ill, tried to sleep in sleeping space on deck fit for perhaps fifty. Woods dozed, squatting with his knees near his chin, and back against another man's. Smith managed to stretch out, but with men lying across his legs. Stening slept on a plank over the water at the stern, and did not realize until next morning that his bed had been the Imperial Japanese Navy's only form of lavatory on board that destroyer.

For the prisoners, time on the two Japanese destroyers had little meaning. Time was pain from wounds, burned eyes, aching muscles, blistered feet, hunger, thirst and lack

of sleep. Men had little urge in those early hours of captivity to think of their future as prisoners. Living then meant will power to survive, and little else. Only later did these men begin to question their chances as war guests of the Japanese.

Then, at dawn next day, they were moved to the hold of the transport, *Somedong Maru*, where they lived for the next four days. They were given water and food—a bucket of rice and a few sardines among twenty men—but many of the men could not eat the rice and went hungry, though P.O. Alf Thomas broke all records the other way by eating thirteen bowls in eight hours.

They had time now to get some of the oil off their bodies and rest their burned eyes in the half-light of the hold. They could sleep—and some slept almost continuously for two days.

Then a windfall came to them which made life a little more bearable. On the day the Japanese invaded Java, a British mine sweeper was at Tanjong Priok in command of Lieutenant-Commander Upton. He decided to try to run through Sunda Strait, even though he knew his ship would almost certainly be sunk. But before he left Tanjong he fully provisioned the *White Wings*, a beautiful yacht abandoned there, put some of his crew aboard and ordered them to follow him out. As he expected, the Japanese sank his sweeper in Sunda. He and other members of his crew survived and got on board the waiting *White Wings*. The Japs caught her also and brought her in to Bantam Bay, where they allowed Upton to transfer most of his stores to the prison hold of the *Somedong Maru*. This was how the prisoners got sugar, tea, jam, milk, cigarettes and even



clothes, and curtains and tablecloths to make clothes of a sort.

The night Upton and his men brought these stores aboard, the first officer of the *Somedong Maru* came to the hold and said in English, "I want some tea, sugar and milk."

"No," the nearest prisoners yelled.

Harper, who was now wearing a shirt so big that it looked like a Victorian nightshirt, said to the Jap, "We have your captain's permission to keep these stores, as you are short of stores yourself. We intend to keep them."

"I will order my men to take what I want if you do not hand them over," the Jap replied.

Eventually, to get rid of him, Harper gave him the supplies, but within half an hour the Jap officer returned carrying a bucket of tea. He put the bucket down in the middle of the hold and without a word signaled to Harper.

Not a man moved or spoke. Then, over in a corner, someone said, "Here's a floggin' white man for yer."

There was not much more than a few sips for each man, but as the bucket emptied Smith noticed that something was wrong because the Jap was getting excited. He glared at the prisoners. Then he pointed to the bucket and said angrily, "I make tea for officers—not for men. Now I will make more tea."

And he did.

And yet, next afternoon two Jap soldiers came into the hold, grabbed the nearest prisoner, who happened to be Lyons, belted him nearly unconscious, kicked him, then laughed as they climbed the ladder.

Stening, who in the *White Wings* lucky dip got a pair of blue shorts, made a shirt by cutting a hole in a green

tablecloth. He took charge, after the Jap officer's visit, of the rest of the tinned milk and doled it out to the wounded. He could not walk and was still ill, and there are patches of that time in the hold that are still blank. He remembers, however, crawling across to look at Davis' broken leg, and to help another badly wounded man, but, apart from these two, the wounded were brought to him by "Jock" Cunningham, a sick-berth petty officer, who gave so much of his time to the wounded and sick that he never seemed to rest.

Without drugs or instruments, and with strips of yacht curtains for bandages, Stening did what he could to help the wounded. Some, however, were beyond even elementary aid, and one of them, with a ruptured stomach, died in agony. Stening could do nothing to make his dying easier except hold his head. He sat for an hour holding the man, and he thought, as he felt the man's ebbing pulse, How long will it be before we, too, die?

Five days after *Perth's* end the survivors were landed at Merak, on Java, opposite Toppers Island, and lined up against cliffs in front of six machine guns.

Davis, naked, lay on a plank he had been carried ashore on. His leg, with the bone ends sticking out like pieces of old cheese, was festering and flyblown.

Stening's injured leg was stiff and he, too, lay.

Woods, Smith and Lyons stood. Smith wore shorts. Lyons had a strip of lace curtain draped round his middle. Woods was naked and nearly black with oil.

They waited.

The rain hushed across them and stopped and hushed again. They waited, watching the black malevolent mouths

of the machine guns and the expressionless faces of the Japs behind them. They waited to be murdered—to fall beside the red cliffs along the edge of the gray expanse of Sunda.

Suddenly a Jap officer, through a Javanese interpreter, barked at them, "If you behave like English gentlemen you will be well treated. If you try to escape you will be shot."

A ripple like a sigh flowed through the prisoners, but none of them spoke. The rain began again.

But worse than anything he had been through, worse even in some ways than facing those machine guns and thinking, I'll be dead in a few seconds, was the poster Lyons saw later as they were being loaded into trucks near Merak railway station.

The poster showed the Blue Mountains—the Three Sisters. The words on the poster read, "Come to Sunny New South Wales."



## Monday: Sangiang

THE WAVES, SPENDING THEMSELVES ON THE coral beach of Sangiang, woke Owen. He sat up and for minutes looked down at them and the dead coral piled like foam after a storm along the beach. He looked at the waves and felt again the malignant water enfolding him, gripping him, pushing him down the darkness of the strait, wrenching at him and dragging him toward an eternity of water in an ocean where he would float and sink and float, and where, slowly disintegrating, he would become one with the water itself.

The waves at that moment fascinated and repelled him. They brought back to him all the desperate fear of the day before, the fifteen hours in the water, the fear of dying, his decision to die; and he hated them, hated them with a cold personal hatred, hated the sea down there and all about this island refuge in the center of Sunda, hated the sea and knew



with a sense of release that if he survived he would never go back to it.

He saw now that he was in a village of brown palm-thatch huts and papaw clumps and a plot of green corn and wild tomatoes; and above, bending and rubbing their hands softly over the hut roofs, were the palms.

In the long grass round the village, and in the village itself, men began to stir and sit up and yawn and scratch. Owen saw Burgess and Norman White and Bradshaw and Tyrell. Then more were getting to their feet like drunken old men—Chaffey, Noble—and among the huts were Dick Ryan, Nelson, Stan Roberts, Ray Parkin, Gosden and others. Some he knew by name, others only by sight. Some he had never seen before.

In the largest hut they found yams, and native tobacco wrapped in dried palm leaf, and matches, and gradually the survivors gathered on the hut veranda and began to eat and roll themselves cigarettes.

As he chewed hungrily, liking the wet earthy flavor of the yam, Owen felt the sun bathing his rested but still stiff body, and bent to pick oil fuel off his toenails. Presently, watching the others sprawled, hunched, squatting on the veranda, he thought, I wonder if we all realize it's only a miracle we're still alive. And then a new restlessness was in him. Perhaps it came from the men themselves, chewing and smoking and scratching their legs and stomachs and backsides where the oil itched, hot and insistent, like sand-fly bites. Perhaps it came from within himself. For suddenly he knew that this morning under the palms was still not survival, only reprieve, for him, for them all, and he could control the restlessness no more and said to Burgess,

"We can't stay here, that's obvious. The Japs'll get us if we do. We'll have to organize something." And Burgess nodded as he rolled the coarse tobacco in a strip of palm leaf and said, "We might even have a crack at Australia. We've got a boat."

Owen counted the men around him. Some still had overalls on, some had shorts, some only singlets. But he was the only man who was naked. He waited until they were smoking, conscious that someone had to take the initiative. At last he got stiffly to his feet, and, naked on the veranda edge, said, "It looks as if we're the only survivors, and I think we ought to thank God for our deliverance. There are twenty-two of us and I think you'll agree we can't stay here. We must try to reach the mainland. But the first thing we need is a leader, so who is it to be? You decide."

The men looked at each other, but eyes evaded eyes. One man kept picking oil from his ears and wiping his fingers on the grass.

"Okay, you take charge," someone said at last, and the rest agreed.

"Right," Owen said. "We need food while we're here and food to store in the boat. We never know where we'll end up once we get away from this dump. Food's our first job. Later we'll decide where we'll make for once we have enough water and tucker."

A Zero came over, just above the palms, and Bradshaw yelled, "Keep still—and keep your faces down."

When the plane had gone, droning toward Java above the flat green strait, Owen split the men into small groups. One party spent the day picking corn from a heap of cobs in a corner of the main hut. Another party collected green

papaws and coconuts. Another searched the beaches. Another tried for oysters and fish. Parkin found a wooden lifeboat complete with oars, sails, pemmican, milk, water and calcium flares. Nelson, who had been a pastry cook and whose one ambition was to run a roadhouse outside Sydney if he ever got back, became official cook. Another man, a former butcher, found three sheep shut in a small hut, and Owen decided to cook one of them before the party finally left Sangiang.

That day they filled their bellies with a thin pinkish stew Nelson made with green papaws, wild tomatoes and corn, and one man said mournfully, "Cripes, this is wonderful! It reminds me of home."

They found a tin of kerosene and used it to get oil off their bodies, and all sat in the late afternoon, like a colony of baboons, and picked the hard oil crust from their eyes and ears and hair, and some even tried to comb their hair with homemade coconut leaf combs.

Then they lay in the huts and slept.

Next morning four of the men had disappeared—and so had the wood lifeboat and much of the food collected the day before. Hard words were spilt over the missing heads that day, but as someone said, "If that's the sort they are we're better without 'em."

Around noon Owen decided to kill one of the sheep, and the butcher and the cook worked with plenty of encouragement from the others. The sheep had been skinned and was being cut up when a stranger came up from the beach. He was red-faced, with a fair beard and hard blue eyes. He wore blue overalls and carried a sheath knife on a lanyard. Owen went to meet him.

"Are you in charge?" the newcomer asked.

"Yes."

"I've got a skiff on the beach and I'm looking for food. I'm making for Batavia."

Owen pointed across Sunda Strait to Java and the black specks that were planes. "You can forget Batavia. The Japs are already there."

He described who they were and how they had been sunk.

"All right," the man said, "then I'll make for Australia."

"In a skiff?"

"Yes. I think I can make it. I was on a mine sweeper sunk in Banka Strait. The Nips had me for two days on Banka Island before I went through and found a skiff on the beach. Then I picked up some passengers. Come and see them."

He led the way to the beach where there was a 16-foot skiff with her sails plastered with mud and her sides streaked with fuel oil. She looked like a native boat. Beside her were two English children, a boy of about five in pants and wearing a strip of old sarong round his head, a girl of about six in a cotton frock and native straw hat, and an attractive woman of about twenty-five. She wore a sarong, but her breasts were bare. She was sun-blistered and was lying on her back on the sand. She looked exhausted. The children, who were also blistered, were making daisy chains with strips of coconut fiber.

"Who on earth are they?" Owen asked.

The children worried him. He wondered how they could survive an escape like this. As he picked up the little boy



he thought of his own small son and wondered whether he would ever see him again.

"She's a Singalese—and the kids' nanny," the sailor explained, jerking his thumb at the woman who lay with her eyes closed. "They're from Penang, I think, and were sunk escaping. I picked them up in the water. They were hanging to some wreckage. I keep the kids in order by telling 'em I'm taking 'em to Java to see their mum—poor little bastards!—but it works."

"She looks just about all in," Owen said, "and the kids are all burned up. You'd better stay here at least till the kids get better."

"No—I'm pushing on to Australia."

But the kids, Owen thought. There's no pity any more—but there's no time for pity. Time isn't minutes or hours any more. It's dying or living, nothing less. We're outside time now.

"I've got a map." That was the sailor again. He pulled a paper from his pocket and unfolded it—a page from a school atlas showing Indonesia and northern Australia. "All I want is food."

Owen took him back to the village and gave him one of the sheep. And while he killed and skinned it, Burgess took a rough tracing of the map on a piece of old newspaper from one of the huts.

The *Perth* men carried corn and tomatoes and native tobacco down to the skiff and helped stow the food and cut up the sheep, and one of the sailors brought a tin of water and gave the woman and children a drink.

The children ignored the men. If they looked at them at

all they did not seem to see them. They kept on making daisy chains. But the woman, Owen noticed, now stared longingly at the huts, though she did not speak. Only afterward did he realize that she never said one word on that beach—nor did the children.

At last, when the skiff was ready, Owen made one last appeal. "Won't you change your mind and wait here a few days? We're going to make for Java once we have enough food. You could come along with us."

He could not stop thinking of the children and their desperate future in an open boat.

The sailor shook his head. "I must push on to Australia" was all he said.

"But the kids?"

"They have to take their chance."

Then he turned to the woman. "Come on, there. Up you get!"

Wearily she rose and glanced once more at the huts. She ignored the sailor. Her face was oval, her eyes black-brown. Her body was slim, her breasts were pointed, and some of the blisters on them had already broken. The children began to cry, and she took them by the hand.

"Stop that or I'll leave you behind." The sailor spoke roughly, though not unkindly. The children stopped crying immediately and scrambled into the boat.

The sailor lighted his pipe and got in, and men pushed the boat off.

"Thanks," he called. "See you in Australia."

Owen and the others watched them go—the man with the fair beard and hard eyes and the pipe in his mouth, sitting at the stern holding the tiller, the woman who did not look

back squatting in the bottom of the boat, the children trailing their fingers in the water, the boat that was almost gunwale-under on the flat sea, rustling against the coral beach.

Everyone watching wondered about those children and was sad, but at least one of the men had other thoughts. "What a waste!" he said feelingly. "I could've gone for that sheila in a big way."

But that was a day of surprises.

In the early afternoon, while the sheep stew was cooking, the Sundanese owners of the village returned, led by a tough-looking fellow with a smallpox-pitted face. He was in khaki shorts, a white coat, a felt hat, and was holding a black Mauser pistol he seemed to know how to handle.

He jumped onto the veranda, while about forty villagers clumped together in the long grass, and shouted and pointed his Mauser at the heaps of corn and tomatoes and papaws, and then at the beach, and then at the Australians. It was obvious to everyone what he meant. He wanted the food back and the Australians to clear out.

Owen thought rapidly. They needed the food to get away, and they didn't want to fight for it—not against a Mauser and, he saw with a glance at the villagers in their purple and red and white sarongs, also against parangs.

"Boys," he ordered, "strip off—otherwise we'll have to fight for it."

The men handed in their watches and rings, and, as he held these out to the man, he called to Nelson, who had never once stopped stirring the stew, "Get that tin down to the beach—quick."

As Nelson picked up the tin, the smell of simmering sheep floated through the village. The Australians glanced

at Owen and at the Sundanese with the Mauser. Owen knew they would fight for that stew—Mauser, parangs and all. He knew he himself would fight for it if he had to. The Sundanese reacted to the stew, too, because he pointed his pistol at Nelson and then back at Owen and shouted. Owen felt desperate. One shot would start a massacre. He looked about him and saw another watch, a gold one, on a sailor's wrist. He grabbed it and handed it over.

For the first time the man with the Mauser smiled and lowered the barrel. That was the signal for everyone to follow Nelson to the beach, where they gathered protectively round the tin and watched as the Sundanese got into a large canoe with some of the villagers and paddled away.

Thank God! Owen thought, but he said, "Okay, boys, we'll have the stew now before any other bastard wants to stop us."

But at that moment another big party of *Perth* survivors came round a point and along the beach toward them.

"Cripes," one of them yelled as he saw Nelson's tin, "a three-course slap-up dinner."

"What a turn for the books!" another called.

The men at the tin looked at one another.

"The cows must've smelled it," someone said in disgust.

The parties shared that stew. They dipped their hands into it or used shells or rough palm spoons they had found in the village. And the meal the original party had waited hours for, and nearly lost, became a snack for all.

The newcomers had got ashore on Toppers Island, where the Javanese lighthouse keeper had given them biscuits and helped them make a raft and paddles from driftwood. And from there they decided to make for Sangiang, where they



had seen smoke; but six American sailors from *Houston*, who had also reached Toppers, thought them crazy to make the attempt and would not come with them.

One of the new party was Claude Woodley, *Perth's* warrant supply officer, and Owen was to bless his arrival, for Woodley, who was still fully dressed, gave him his under-pants.

As Owen put them on he quoted to himself, And thus I clothe my naked villainy. After days of nudity he felt that he had just got into his tails.

The combined parties collected more food that afternoon, and at first light next morning—Wednesday—they packed all the food they could, including more of the cooked sheep, into the boat and waited for the Japanese destroyer to pass.

The day before, Burgess had timed this destroyer and found that she passed the island on patrol every three hours. Now they waited until she moved south. Then forty-one men got into that boat designed to hold about twenty-five, and they started to sail and row for the Java coast. They were halfway across when the destroyer turned back and headed for them, and they could see the cream at her bows as she put on speed.

She's after us, Owen thought, and anger gathered in him like a little storm and silently he cursed the destroyer and the Japs and the sea that carried them.

"It's us for the high jump, boys," someone muttered.

Then a rower asked, "What'll we do?"

"Keep pulling," Owen said, "Take no notice of her. It's our only chance."

He gambled that the Japanese would think they were

natives. The Australians were still black or brown with oil, and some wore straw hats picked up in the village. Their mothers would never have known them.

When 200 yards away the destroyer stopped her engines, and Owen could see officers on her bridge probing with glasses at them. He felt like shaking his fists at them in a gesture of defiance, however futile.

"Pull," he called quietly to the rowers. "Don't even look at her."

The men rowed, and prayed as they rowed. The destroyer was a quarter of a mile away now, and still shrinking. Then her bow swung and she turned south and resumed her patrol.

"Hell!" a sweaty stoker said. "That was worse than getting spliced."

More urgently now, as though they all feared the destroyer might change her mind and return, they pulled for Java and reached it just below Fourth Point, about twenty miles southwest of St. Nicolas Point. They grounded on the coral and waded ashore and lay on the sand, and its dry harshness was sweet to them all.

The day was Wednesday, March 4. The time was 11 A.M.



## Monday: Java

AT DAWN THAT MONDAY MORNING—TWO DAYS before Owen's party crossed from Sangiang—Gillan, Campbell, Lowe, McDonough and the rest of the first boat party woke on their Java beach.

Lying filthy and exhausted on the coarse sand under the palms, they decided that the best thing they could do was to leave Campbell and four other wounded or sick men, split into two groups and go in opposite directions, one north, the other south, in search of the Dutch and help.

Gillan was one of those who made south along the shore of Sunda Strait, but he was blind with oil and could never have left the wounded without the aid of Bill Hogman, a stoker P.O., who, unasked, took his hand and led him after the others, led him all that day and far into the night, guiding his steps, explaining what the country looked like, encouraging him and handling him like a child. Gillan's only

memory of those hours was the stoker's deep voice, the feel of his rough hand, the texture of sand and grass and fallen palm leaves and hot flat road under his bare feet, the constant burning in his eyes, the desperate lost feeling of being blind, the still terror in his mind whether he would ever see again.

In a village some miles south of the original landfall they met an officer from *Houston* who, before he left them to go inland to another village where he had heard other Americans were, advised the *Perth* party to wait, as the Dutch, he said, had promised him transport. An hour later, however, a native policeman brought a penciled note from the officer that his original report was, unfortunately, false, and advising the Australians to make for the hills, where the Dutch might still be fighting, as quickly as possible.

Gillan was naked, except for his topee, which he now regarded almost as a token of survival, and his identity disc on a platinum chain—a gift from his wife. But before they left the village and headed inland, an old Chinese put a pair of short pantaloons into his hand and said in English, "Good luck!" Hogman helped Gillan put them on, and said, "Now you look like a sheila in bloomers."

All that day Hogman led Gillan across the flat coastal paddy country and up into the hills. At the few villages they went through the Chinese storekeepers gave them rice, but the natives spat at them and often threatened them.

They reached a hill village late at night—they saw lights and limped toward them—and slept on the floor of a small hospital. There, Hogman brought a Dutch officer to Gillan, who told him they were all from the Australian cruiser *Perth* sunk in Sunda Strait and wanted to continue fighting.



"Can you get us arms and medical supplies?" Gillan asked.

"Stay here," the Dutchman said, "and we'll get you all you want in the morning."

But in the morning the Dutchman had gone.

In the morning, too, Gillan's eyes were still painful, but they felt a little better and he found that he could see if he pulled his oil-stuck eyelids apart and held them. When the light stabbed at his swollen eyes he knew he was liberated from the terrifying serfdom of the dark.

Then he found a blue and white sarong in a cupboard and wrapped it over his pantaloons.

He now noticed that some of the men, whose feet were cut and swollen, could barely stand. One man had stubbed most of his right toenails off. Another had trodden on a stake in a paddy field. All had sore feet. But Gillan persuaded them to keep moving. "We can fight in the hills," he explained. "We must go on from here."

They walked all that day up a winding round through plantations and jungle, stumbling and limping up the road, hoping at every bend to run into Dutch soldiers or civilians who could help them. Gillan's one aim, and the aim of them all, was to get arms, to keep together as a party and fight on.

Then, in the late afternoon, a big group of natives surrounded them. The natives, who wore only short sarongs, were armed with parangs and knives. They lined up across the road ahead of them and behind them.

"Keep together," Gillan advised, "and go for them only if they go for us."

But all the time he thought, How silly this is! These

people are as bad as the Japanese. We escape from the Japs to have our throats cut by someone else. This is worse than being in the water.

The Australians sat on the roadside and waited to see what would happen. They were weary and hungry, and fey with the fears of hunted men. They picked up stones, their only weapons, and waited. The natives argued among themselves. Perhaps they were just as bewildered or fearful as the Australians. One native with a parang moved toward the *Perth* men, but Gillan lifted a heavy stick he had found at the hospital, and the native moved back.

"What'll we do?" someone asked at last.

"Nothing," Gillan said, "except wait. If we try to go through them they'll wipe us out."

Then they heard a motor and watched the natives scatter into the trees as a truck flying the Japanese flag on its bonnet came down the road. There were three Indonesians in the truck. They wore white arm bands with the Japanese red sun on them. Their leader jumped out and said in broken English, "You prisoner. You be well treated," and pointed to the truck.

As Gillan climbed in he knew that capture was both an end and a beginning. He found comfort, however, in his survival in the sinking ship and later in the water, and in the fact that he was on land and still alive. Capture, too, broke the long tension of escape, and he felt that the countless little hooks that had held him together for so long were now dragging apart. As exhaustion flowed in and numbed him he lifted his oil-burned eyelids and looked at the men in the truck with him.

"Please, God," he prayed, "help us and deliver us all and look after our families at home!"

The truck swayed along the mountain road, and natives on the roadside and along the paddy terraces jeered at the glimpsed Australians. At last they came to Pandeglang, twenty miles northeast of Labuan, and as their truck stopped outside the local jail a big crowd of Indonesians gathered round and chanted, "English finish, English finish," and spat at them and lashed at them with sticks.

Back on the beach the wounded and ill waited for help that never came—Campbell, his leg broken; Lowe, ill with fuel oil; Gordon Webster, with a badly gashed arm; Danny Maher, with back and shoulder wounds and one arm useless. A fifth man, whose identity has never been established, was dying from the concussion of water shell bursts.

They lay on the sail spread on the sand under the palms on the edge of the beach. They had among them one tin of biscuits, about as hard as cement and equally difficult to eat. They got water that tasted like flat soda water flavored with Epsom salts, by digging in the sand among the palm roots.

On that first morning, when the others had left them, natives found the lifeboat and ransacked it, and stared poker-faced at the wounded until Campbell tossed them biscuits and pointed upward, and then they grinned and climbed the trees and brought down a dozen nuts, which they husked and sliced before they went away.

The fifth man, who had been delirious for a long time, became worse and began to writhe and twitch on the sail

and call. He called one name, again and again. Then he became quiet, with suspended breathing up to 30 seconds. Then he died.

In the afternoon the natives returned and Campbell, by pointing at the dead man and scooping at the sand, told them what he wanted them to do. They dug a shallow grave with their hands and parangs, and Webster and Maher, both in pain, half carried, half dragged the body across and put it in, the natives shook their heads sadly as they covered it up.

After they had gone, Campbell looked at the grave for a long time and thought, That's where I'll be if we don't get help soon. He was surprised at his own calm assessment of his future.

On Tuesday morning Lowe's vomiting had stopped and he felt stronger, though his skin was green under the oil smears and he was still very weak. He decided to look for help, and Campbell and the others waited all day, but he did not return.

That evening Campbell drank the milk of two coconuts and felt strangely calm and almost happy as he watched the sun going down across Sunda and heard the soft scraping of the palm leaves above him and saw the first star. He wondered if he was becoming delirious, and, to reassure himself, picked up pebbles and counted them over and over.

But next morning he began to hope that even the Japanese would find them. The tin of biscuits—their only bargaining power with the natives for coconuts—was gone. "Some bastard's pinched the biscuits," he called.



And Webster looked across and said, "That's torn it."

Webster's arm stank now like rotten fish, and the stench got worse, even though he washed the wound almost every hour in the sea, as the day became hotter.

In the middle morning a native brought the biscuits back and apologized in English he said he had learned in Batavia. "Man who take tin bad man," he said. "We from village sorry."

But now Campbell was no longer interested in the biscuits. He realized that they symbolized static waiting on the beach—that the biscuits simply meant death if he stayed where he was. He looked at the tin and thought, They've been a decoy all the time. Without them we would have been forced to move.

"Where can we find a doctor?" he asked. "And where are the Dutch?"

For the first time for days his voice betrayed his sense of urgency.

The native told them there was a doctor at Labuan, to the south, and that the Dutch had all gone, but that nobody had yet seen the Japanese.

They talked this news over and agreed that Webster should look for help, but in the opposite direction from Lowe. Webster did not want to leave them, but they persuaded him it might be the best for all of them.

"I'm staying," Maher said in his rough voice with its slight stammer. "I'm not leaving Gavin. You go. If you find help you'll save the lot of us."

The day dragged on. A heated wind blew sand into their eyes and into their wounds. They drank the sour-

bitter water and sweated and drank. The natives came and climbed for nuts and received their biscuits. And at night they dragged their nets a few hundred yards down-beach to the light of palm flares, and their bodies in the glare were like figures in bronze.

On Wednesday morning Campbell knew he would die on the beach unless he tried to move. He said to Maher, "We'll have to get to hell out of this. If I had a crutch I could try to walk."

And so Maher persuaded a native with a parang to cut a forked stick for him from a tree among the palms, and with part of an old life belt he padded the fork.

"Okay, Gavin," he called at last, "she's a beaut."

Campbell looked suspiciously at the crutch. "I'll take your word for it."

At about 10 A.M. they started along the road behind the beach, Maher carrying the sail and supporting Campbell at first, then Campbell hopping along on his own. His broken leg, still held by the rough splints made in the water, stabbed with pain at every movement, and soon the fork began to wear through the padding and dig into his armpit. It wore two large blisters, and the blisters broke and the flesh began to tear into thin cottonlike shreds. But Campbell kept hopping, even though he had to stop for rest every few hundred yards.

At one of the many stops he sat with his face in his hands thinking, I must keep moving . . . I'm letting Danny down. I'd be dying on the beach if it wasn't for Danny.

In the afternoon thunderstorm rain poured over them and they drank standing with mouths open to the clouds,

though later, when the storm had rattled inland, they lay on the road and drank from muddy puddles and cooled their faces and their wrists with the yellow water.

Campbell covered five miles that day—five miles of agony—before he collapsed at a road shelter just outside a fishing village and lay for a long time where he fell. Then Maher left him and went to the village to beg for food, and while he was away Campbell saw a pony cart approaching and waved feebly with his crutch. The driver stopped and got off, and Campbell made signs that he would give him the sail for a lift. The driver tipped his felt hat back on his head and grinned. Then he went back to the pony cart and returned with a parang. He sliced the air in front of Campbell and pointed at the sail. Campbell shook his head and gripped his crutch. The man edged closer, the parang ready to strike. When he was within range Campbell thought, It'll be silly getting killed now. He nodded and motioned to the sail. The man grabbed it and spat at him. The crowd that had gathered jeered and spat at Campbell as the man dumped the sail in the pony cart and drove away.

At dusk, as they were eating the handful of rice that Danny Maher had brought back, a dozen natives lighted a fire behind the shelter, and a small bright-eyed boy came into the shelter and offered a baked sweet potato. The potato was warm in Campbell's hand—and suddenly he felt like crying. The boy explained in good English that he was the chief's son, and that the men around the fire were members of the village council who were now deciding what to do with them. Campbell noticed that one man

shouted louder than the rest and kept pointing at them, and he said to the boy, "What's that one shouting so much about?"

"He wants to cut your throats," the boy said, "but my father wants to let you stay till tomorrow."

"Oh, does he?" Danny said.

"Yes," the boy replied, "he says he'll cut yours first."

After about an hour the village council departed, and Campbell and Maher lay in the shelter and dozed. But they could not sleep. Every time Campbell went to sleep he woke seconds later and grabbed his crutch to defend himself. Then he dozed again and the same thing happened. In the morning he was exhausted and his arm was so stiff he could only just move it, and his leg throbbed.

A woman came from the village with a white enamel basin of warm water. She put it on the seat beside Campbell, and beside it put a new cake of violent-perfumed green soap. She pointed to the basin, and smiled. Campbell washed his face and hands and dried his face on the filthy sleeve of his boiler suit. Maher washed and let the sun dry him. Then the woman went away and the chief came and bowed and told them through his son that they must go because the Japanese would shoot every man in the village if they found them helping white people.

Campbell got on his crutch and hopped three miles before he fell into another roadside shelter and lay on the earth floor. He could go no farther. His armpit was one suppurating sore. His leg was black and swollen, and the pain was like a hammer beating against the broken bone.

And so they stayed there for days, their guts aching with emptiness, their faces and bodies swollen and itching with



mosquito bites. Their desolate loneliness was like a gathering fog across Campbell's mind. They slept during the day if they could, and sat all night swatting mosquitoes. Campbell's only occupation in all that time of misery was peeling oil fuel off his body, and watching the skin come off with it—dry like sunburned skin. Each day Maher walked back to the village to beg a handful of rice and to plead for a conveyance to take them to Labuan. Apart from the little



rice, one woman gave him ten cents, and another gave him half a sarong to cover his shorts which were by this little more than strips of drill hanging round him like a scanty fringe.

At last a pony cart sent by the chief picked them up, carted them to the river opposite Labuan, and a raft took them across. And from there Campbell, with Maher helping and urging him, hopped the last 200 yards of that journey to Labuan.

"Come on, Gavin," Danny Maher kept saying, "it's only another ten yards, just another ten."

They were in a street at last when a woman in European clothes called in English, "Are you Australian sailors?"

"Yes," Maher said, "where can I get a doctor for him?"

The woman crossed the road. "Put your arm around my shoulder," she said to Campbell, "and come with me."

Her calm voice revived him. He drew strength from her. New hope was like a transfusion. "Thank you" was all he could say; but he wanted to shout so that the whole world could hear, "There is a God after all."

When they reached a house set back from the street the woman called and two American sailors came out and carried him in. As they put him on the floor he asked, "Who is she?" and one of the Americans said, "We call her Eliza—but she's a goddam saint if you ask me."

And then Webster came into the room, and the three from the beach were together again.

The Japanese arrived next morning, and two days later Campbell and others were taken to a hospital at Pandeglang in charge of an Indonesian doctor and a Dutch nursing sister. The doctor dressed Campbell's leg and put it in proper splints.

"It has started to knit," he said cheerfully. "It is a miracle after what you have been through. The splints you say were put on in the water saved your leg."

At this native hospital at Pandeglang were Campbell, Maher, Webster, Ernie Owen, Nick Carter, another *Perth* A.B. and an American officer from *Houston*. Owen, Carter and the A.B. had been attacked by natives and badly slashed with parangs and knives. Owen then was dangerously ill and died later. The U.S. officer died from internal injuries a few days after they reached the hospital.

For a month they lay on canvas stretchers at one end of this one-ward native hospital. The Dutch sister, always in immaculate white uniform, looked after them like a mother. She spoke only a few words of English, but was able to tell them that her husband had been killed in the Java fighting. She washed them, dressed their wounds, never ceased to smile at them and encourage them. She fed them twice a day on rice and melted brown sugar—the only food in the hospital. But each night she walked two miles to another village to buy bread for them and to steal tins of plum jam and sometimes even a little sausage. Only at night, because of the other native patients in the ward, could she smuggle this food.

Then the Japs came again and took them away to Serang. And as the unknown Dutch sister watched them get into the truck she stood on the hospital steps and cried and waved until they were out of sight on the mountain road.

Campbell has never forgotten her, nor Eliza, nor Richard Dennis Maher, the man who saved his life but who was to die as a prisoner of war.

## Wednesday: Java

ON THAT WEDNESDAY MORNING, WHEN THE second boat party landed on Java after crossing from Sangiang, Owen's aim was to reach Labuan, which he thought was a big port, and get transport from there to Tjilatjap to link up with Dutch forces he still believed must be in southern Java.

For these reasons, he said to the men round him on the beach, "I suggest we leave the boat and walk south to Labuan. We'll have a better chance that way of reaching the Dutch and getting help. What do you think?"

But a group, led by Lieutenant John Thode and including Gosden, disagreed. They felt the best way to escape the Japanese was not by land, but by sea. They planned to try for Australia, and voted for the boat.

The two groups argued and at last Owen said, "All right, then, but let's decide finally at Labuan. Whichever party gets there first will wait for the other. Agreed?"

And so the boat pushed off and the land party went inland to the road behind the beach and then turned south through paddy fields and coconut groves and patches of thin forest.

Owen wanted to keep as far ahead of the Japanese as possible, so he said to his companions, "If we walk fast and keep it up all day we should reach Labuan in about



seven hours or so. If anyone gets behind those in front won't go beyond Labuan until we're all together again."

Within minutes of starting a man in a blue and white sarong passed them on a bicycle. His bicycle wobbled from side to side. He yelled again and again, "Come for a ride with me . . . come for a ride with me."

"Cripes, it's Clarkey," one of the party called. "Where in hell did he come from?"

"The poor mug's gone troppo."

They could not stop him, nor had they the strength to chase him. They let him go and watched him riding north toward the Japanese, yelling and waving, followed by a worried-looking native who obviously owned the bicycle.

Then, another mile farther on, four of the men protested that the speed was too fast for them.

"If you don't like it you can lump it," Owen said. "We've already agreed that we'll meet at Labuan."

"We don't want to go to Labuan," one said.

"We're going to Batavia."

"The Nips are there," men reminded them.

But the four wouldn't listen. They had already made up their minds to separate from the main party. They left and cut inland—and natives killed three of them within a few hours, and slashed the fourth across the back with parangs.

As Owen walked on he thought, We're not sane. I'm not sane any more. They're not. There's a sort of madness in us all. We're all done. How can you blame anyone for not behaving rationally under these conditions?

He looked back at the others straggling, stumbling along the road. "If we get out of this alive will any of us ever be completely sane again?"

The road ahead was bitumen, then gray, then blue-gray as it disappeared into the haze. The road became hotter and hotter under his bare feet and his feet burned. He left the road and walked on the grass, but the grass was short and sharp as wire and every step meant pain that stabbed up his legs, and he went back to the road where his feet began to burn again, and the pain was enough to make a man cry.

Five miles down the road they limped into a village and stopped at a store where Owen made signs for food. The storekeeper pulled a knife. Owen backed away and made signs for water. The storekeeper scowled, filled a dirty glass and pushed it across the counter. Owen drank and, trying to show that he and his companions were friendly, patted a small boy on the head. The storekeeper edged round the counter. Owen and the others ran from the village back to the road.

Curses, scowls and spit followed them all down this long road, and in the paddies bells clamored to warn the peasants of their approach, and men, women and children scuttled to palm clumps for cover or ran to keep out of their way. The bells were harsh and sinister, and the *Perth* men cursed whenever they heard them, for the urgent warnings from the bells seemed to cut them off from humankind and set them apart in their misery and loneliness.

In the afternoon, the road slid over a small hill, and from its crest Owen saw the sea again, and, close in to the land, the lifeboat and the men rowing, and once the sunlight splashed across a wet oar, and the sight of that boat gave him new strength to go on.

Beyond the hill they left the paddy fields and were among

coconut plantations, and their feet on the hot road through the plantations burned and bled and their bodies burned and itched with oil. They climbed deserted road blocks of fallen trees and circled deserted concrete pillboxes. The men were strung out now over a couple of miles, with Owen still in front making the pace, but slower now, much slower.

At times he felt he was not walking on a road, but on the red-hot air just above it. At other times he felt that his body was almost divorced from his metronomic legs and that only his elongated, pain-drugged muscles held body and legs together. He was a body, it seemed, adrift in space, bent like a hunchback, each breath painful as it stabbed at his dry throat through his leather-dry mouth.

Just before sundown he reached a village where a young man in a linen coat and a black and orange sarong was sitting outside a hut. Owen made signs for coconuts.

"Certainly," the man said in English.

He clapped his hands and men with long poles knocked down the nuts, husked them and cut their tops off with parangs.

"How far to Labuan?" Owen asked, as he thanked the man and drank.

"It's just over there."

"Will I find the Dutch there?"

The young man shook his head. "There have been no Dutch at Labuan for years. It's only a small fishing village."

The significance of this was now only too clear, and Owen realized that their chances must now be thin. For the first time he felt he could not go on, that escape ended

here, and an inner voice whispered, pleaded, No more; lie down here.

"Then there's no chance of getting transport from Labuan to Tjilatjap?"

"None," the man said. "Tjilatjap is three hundred miles east on the coast. . . . But who are you?"

Owen told him and he held out his hand. "I'm sorry for you. I had much to do with British people when I was in Batavia. I am a schoolmaster and left Batavia only recently. Now the Japanese are coming, and I do not like them. They are not our friends."

He took Owen down to the river and put him aboard a raft and told the raftmen to take him across.

"Good luck," he said, "and be careful. The hillmen have come down and sacked the stores in Labuan. They may be still about. They are not good people. They will kill if they get the chance."

On the far side of the river Owen waited for the rest of the party. Singly and in small groups they struggled in. And some could hardly stand as they came off the raft. And some fell. Then, after a rest, they all entered Labuan and saw, as the man had said, that it was only a fishing village with a few crude streets and a harbor full of little boats like gondolas painted green and scarlet and yellow like the boats of Gauguin, and in the harbor was the lifeboat—just pushing off from a pier. Owen shouted and waved, and as they hurried toward her they passed twenty natives carrying parangs who began to follow them.

"Run," someone yelled. "They're after us."

They dived into a coconut plantation and stumbled through it to the shore and waded out over coral for

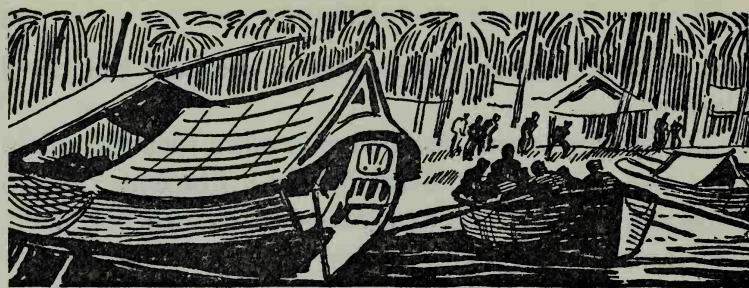


200 yards until they could swim to the boat and crawl aboard. . . .

The Sangiang party, reunited once more, spent that night on a reef off Labuan. They lighted a fire with calcium flares and warmed tins of condensed milk—their only food. The meat brought from Sangiang had already gone bad.

Then the rain crept in from the sea and beat against them and beat against the dark.

Wet, cold, hungry and exhausted, they spent the night trying to sleep on beds of jagged coral. All night the rain never ceased, and the rain after the heat of the day was ice-cold. And the night drained them of all feeling and of all thought except their frigid misery.



## Thursday: The Boat

IN THE DISMAL MORNING, OVERCAST AND COLD, the old dispute began again—escape by sea or land? Owen still wanted to try for Tjilatjap—a name that had become almost an obsession with him—just as his hatred of the sea and his desire to get away from it had become an obsession. Inevitably he argued for the land, while others argued for the sea. After wrangling for an hour, ten chose to stay with the boat, and the rest to follow Owen. And so the survivors decided to split for the last time, and the boat party put the land party ashore.

As the clouds lifted, Gosden watched the men with Owen disappear among the huts at Labuan. Then, as he pulled on his oar and the heavy lifeboat moved between the painted fishing boats and out of the harbor, he wondered if he would see any of those men again. He knew, however, as he had known in the water after *Perth's* end,

as he had on Sangiang, that, no matter what happened to the men ashore, or his coppers in the lifeboat, he would live to see his home again. Bending to the stroke, and seeing the village huts receding and the clouds heavy on the mountains inland, he thought, There's a plan for every man, and when that plan is completed that is the end. This is not my time. My death is not determined yet. I will get home.

They were moving down the coast now, sailing, with a split bag for a sail, and rowing, but the wind was only a whisper from the wide mouth of Sunda, and the men swung at the heavy oars and felt the boat thick and sluggish under them.

They were ten—Thode in command by general consent, White, Knight, Abbott, Parkin, Coyne, Willis, Griffiths, Mee and Gosden. With a few gallons of water, one tin of biscuits, six tins of milk and some green bananas and papaws, their destination was Australia.

"We haven't much food or water," Thode said, as he pulled his oar, "so we must try for some. Before we go round Java Head there's an island called Princes near the entrance to Sunda Strait. If we're lucky we might find something there."

Princes was a row of thirty-five miles, but they got there in the afternoon and ran ashore on a rocky beach with high cliffs above them and blue Krakatoa 'way behind them. And on the beach were boxes—about sixty of them—and the men could hardly believe their eyes.

Food?

"Tinned asparagus," Coyne yelled.

"Steak and kidney and a bottle of beer," said Abbott.

"Even floggin' bully," said Mee.

They grabbed rocks and broke the nearest boxes open. They tugged at the splintered boards and tore at the packing.

"Would you believe it!"

The first box was full of banknotes—Australian banknotes—£1 notes up to £100 notes. Thode picked up a fat bundle and examined it. "It's Jap occupation money—not ours," he said. "So they're all ready to take us over."

"That's what they think," someone said.

By this, more boxes were open and more banknotes were on the beach. Then one of the men called, "Take a look at this."

His box contained ammonia, and as more boxes were smashed they held either more ammonia or more notes.

On that beach were millions of pounds' worth of paper money, and enough ammonia to start a chemical factory. But food . . .

Desperately now, the men opened the remaining boxes—banknotes, banknotes, ammonia, more banknotes, more ammonia. They tossed the notes away. There were single notes and bundles of notes in the water, all along that beach, trodden into the sand, torn, pulped. The men cursed them, kicked at them, threw bundles into the sea. At last, all the boxes were open—all except one—and Mee spotted it. It was wedged between the rocks at one end of the beach.

"Might as well try my luck," he said, and attacked it with a rock in each hand.

And this box, which looked like all the others, held a full set of lifeboat sails—mainsail, foresail and jib.

Eagerly they pulled them out, for sails were what they wanted, and even more important than food.



"Boys," Thode said to the group around the box, "this definitely means we'll get home."

The ten now felt that luck was swinging their way. Before dark, they fitted the sails to the lifeboat, and cut down—with a strip of iron binding from one of the boxes—the one coconut tree on that beach. It had eight nuts on it. They dined that night on those nuts, on periwinkles collected from the rocks, on two tins of milk, and on brackish water they got by digging in the sand at the back of the beach. And next morning—Friday—they started for Australia, planning to pick up food in southern Java before making the final crossing. They decided to use their four tins of milk and the tin of biscuits only in an emergency, and rationed themselves to one green banana, including the skin, one green papaw—skin, too—and a quarter of a pint of water among the ten of them each day.

"With a stop at Tjilatjap," Thode argued, "we should reach Australia in five weeks."

And Gosden thought, We'll do it, too—even if we're skeletons when we hit Darwin or Broome.

For the next twelve days, after they rounded Java Head, the days and night followed patterns almost identical in their monotony and misery. The days were windless and scorching, and the sun seemed to sit just above them and mock them. The men rowed all day in shifts. The oil still on their bodies heated from early morning until it tortured them. The only relief—and that only temporary—was to get into the warm sea. But as sharks followed the boat day and night, those on board had to stand guard and beat the water with their oars while the others were over the side.

At night, between dusk and about 9 P.M., there was

moonlight and a breeze. Then they felt the heat soaking from their bodies and life for a few hours was almost pleasant—except for their hunger aches and the eternal question mark in their minds—would they ever see Australia, or any other place?

Each dusk, Thode—their source of strength and direction—set the course for the night. Each dusk Thode pointed out a star and said, "That's the one we have to steer on."

They had a compass, but no light except matches so that the compass at night was useless.

Up to 9 P.M. steering was simple. Then clouds blacked out the stars, the wind changed, and it rained. On many nights, when they were completely blind, they sailed in circles or sailed back the way they had come. And every night they huddled on the bottom boards, half frozen, praying for the blistering sun they cursed by day.

One night, when they seemed to be circling, Thode lighted a distress rocket in an attempt to check the compass. The rocket got away and hit Griffiths, who was asleep, in the stomach. Griffiths, awakened with a rocket roasting him, leaped overboard—and they nearly lost him. They just managed to grab him as he went under and dragged him back on board. He was badly burned. He had a sizzled blister the size of a small plate over his navel. So they laid him on the boards and poured kerosene, from a lamp they could not light, over the burn. The kerosene, and baths in the sea during the days that followed, saved him and the burn began to heal.

There were things, little things, to relieve the monotony of the sea—sea without land. Gosden noted the seaweed patterns on the water, the schools of little pinkish fish with



faces like inquisitive children, the ever-present shark fins knifing the water astern and around them. Once a day, too, Thode filled his pipe with native tobacco, lighted it with a rocket match, and handed it around. For each man there was enough for a short smoke, and after the smoke the constant food ache was less urgent.

On the fourteenth day after *Perth* went down, Horace Abbott, big and still fat despite his diet of papaw and banana, stood on a seat and announced, "Would you believe it, boys, but I've got the urge."

"You've what?" Mee said.

"It's dinkum," Abbott repeated. "I've got the urge."

Now this problem of constipation was one of fundamental importance to all aboard—and also to every man who survived the Battle of Sunda Strait. It was a constant source of individual concern and group speculation, and men talked and argued about it for days and even weeks. Each man had his own theory or theories, and each man waited, in a state of suspended anxiety, for the hour when he—and only he—could return to the habit of a lifetime.

As Horrie Abbott held one of the shrouds and balanced on the side of the boat, the other nine waited, each man thinking of himself and his own problem long delayed. They encouraged Abbott—by counting and whistling and occasional cheers, and with suggestions intended as a guide to their more fortunate comrade. And at last Abbott, to calls of "You beaut," and "Come on, Horrie," completed his solo performance.

"Boy, oh boy," he said with feeling, "what a relief!"

But everyone was disappointed. They felt that Horrie



had let them down by not adequately settling the vital problem confronting them all.

"Hell," Coyne said in disgust, "a baby rabbit could do better than that."

Still, every man was to remember Abbott's hour when his own time came. Gosden, for instance, lasted 49 days—and then all was normal. The average time for most *Perth* survivors was about three weeks, though some achieved their ambition earlier, and others, like Gosden, went a month or longer without any ill effects whatever.

On the twelfth day out from Princes Island Thode announced, "If we're lucky we'll see a monolith at the entrance to Tjilatjap some time today."

Nobody, of course, believed him. They thought he was merely trying to keep up their morale. But in the early afternoon they saw land, and then hills, and finally a gap in the hills—and the monolith. They knew now they must get food, and take a chance and go in. They were nearly starving and losing weight fast. And only when that decision was made, and they were heading in to Tjilatjap after their journey of 300 miles, was Gosden conscious that he was so weak he could hardly stand.

At that time they did not know, nor would they have cared if they had, that they sailed through a Dutch mine field covering the port before they finally entered harbor.

As they came into the landlocked harbor it was Willis who said, "Do you see what I see, boys?"—and everyone had. There were hundreds of Japanese troops along one shore, but far away, so Thode swung the tiller and headed for the other side of the harbor where they finally tied up

to a wharf near a Dutch patrol boat still flying the Dutch flag.

"If we can get her we'll make Australia," Thode said. "Let's look for food first and then grab her as soon as it gets dark. By the look of her there's nobody on board."

Some of the ten were so weak that the stronger men had to haul them onto the wharf. There was food there—heaps of it, tons of tinned beef and carrots and fruit. There were cases of whisky and gin and cigarettes. But the men had only just started to collect the food when Coyne called, "Look out—there's trouble coming."

Two Dutch officers in green uniforms were running along the long wharf toward them. One carried a Tommy gun, the other a pistol.

"They don't look too friendly to me," someone said, as they waited.

"Who are you?" the one with the Tommy gun called, first in Dutch, then English.

Thode went forward and they stopped and waited for him. He explained and said they must have food to get to Australia.

But the officer with the pistol shook his head. "Nippon is your friend," he said. "You must give up your plan to reach Australia and go to him for protection."

Thode went back to the others. He lowered his voice. "You heard what he said. What's it to be? Surrender, or shall we have a crack at them?"

The Australians looked at the Dutchmen covering them, and then at one another. They were too weak to fight. They knew that. They knew also they had no hope against

the spray from a Tommy gun. "You bastards—you yellow fifth-column bastards," someone said.

And so at gun point they surrendered.

The Dutchmen marched the Australians off the wharf and through the hot and stinking little town to Japanese headquarters where, as they arrived, soldiers were beating up looters with boots and rifle butts. One of the Dutchmen called in Japanese and an officer came out. He was a colonel. He spoke perfect English.

He looked the Australians up and down. "Who are you?"

Thode stepped forward. "We are survivors from an Australian warship sunk by Nippon."



"You sank our ships in Sunda Strait," the colonel said. "Look at me. I'm still covered in oil. I can't get the stuff off."

They saw that what he said was true, and that the grinning soldiers who gathered round them all had oil on them.

Gosden, as he saw the Japs smiling and felt one pat his back, thought, I don't believe it . . . I just don't believe it, and said to Mee beside him, "There must be a catch somewhere."

But for once, in that long and brutal war with the Japanese, there was no catch. These Japs were Imperial Guards. It was true they had been sunk in Sunda Strait either by *Perth* or *Houston*. And they treated the ten Australians almost like brothers—and certainly like heroes. They could not do enough for them.

The colonel detailed two soldiers to look after them. These took them to a tiled courtyard behind headquarters, where there was a pump, and gave them soap. The Australians washed, but the oil would not come off, so the Japs brought clean white towels soaked in petrol and actually wiped as much oil as they could off their prisoners. The ten were bewildered. They could hardly believe that what was happening to them was not some pleasant but crazy dream.

Then the Jap guards took them to a room in the headquarters building, sat them at a table, and gave each man a bowl of rice, a tin of bully beef, some pickled cucumber and a bottle of Dutch beer. And after the meal one of the guards brought them tea.

Abbott peered hard into his bowl and said satirically, "Wot—no milk?"



The guards did not speak English, yet they seemed to understand. One brought a tin of condensed milk and put it in front of Abbott.

Abbott, who by this time was enjoying himself, said, "Wot—no sugar?"

The same guard as before brought a tin of sugar.

The ten looked blankly at one another.

Then they were each given a packet of cigarettes and a box of matches before being taken back to the compound. There, both guards made signs that the Australians now had to sleep. They did this first with a pantomime demonstration—heads on one side and eyes closed—and one even lay on the ground. But before the prisoners could move the guards started to chatter, and one scratched his shaven head before he called to another Jap standing at the entrance to the courtyard. This man disappeared and they heard a truck drive off. The guards grinned at their prisoners and pointed to the oil still on their own bodies and bobbed their heads like dolls, but when one of the Australians sat on the tiles the Japs shook their heads and frowned. It was all very confusing, this bedtime pantomime. But in ten minutes the truck returned with eight double mattresses which the guards spread in the courtyard. Then one of them said something and pointed to one side of the courtyard, and something else and pointed to the other side. The Australians didn't understand and didn't move. The smallest Jap hopped with excitement. Then, very ceremoniously, he saluted and bowed to the other guard and then glanced at the prisoners expectantly. At last someone caught on.

"I think he means officers on one side, men on the other."

Abbott shook his head in mock seriousness. "Wot—no pillows?"

But that was what the Jap meant, because he smiled when Thode went to one side and lay down, and the rest went to the other side. When the ten were on their mattresses, four of them sharing, the little guard brought out a chair, put it in the center of the courtyard, and sat there with his rifle across his knees.

As night came down the Australians watched him. He was so small, and with his thick glasses and shaven head, so much a cartoon Japanese. They watched him start to count them—"Ichi . . . ni . . . san . . . shi . . ." and then he stopped, as though he could not count above four, frowned and began again.

The last thing Gosden remembered that night was the little Jap saying, "Ichi . . . ni . . . san . . . shi," and then stopping and looking puzzled and slowly starting all over again.

At dawn the guards brought them a cake of white, scented soap and a clean white towel apiece, and pointed to the well. And after the prisoners had washed they were given more rice, bully and cucumber for breakfast.

"Wot—no beer?"

That was Abbott again.

But this time the Japs ignored him.

As they ate, other Jap soldiers kept coming into the room and smiling and patting them on the backs like long-lost friends and offering them cigarettes and lighting them for them.

Breakfast finished, the little Jap went off and soon returned with a sergeant. The two talked for a few minutes,

nodding at the prisoners, then the sergeant disappeared. But later he and other soldiers came with bundles of clothes, and each Australian got a pair of shorts and a shirt. Some of the shirts were black, others jungle green.

Then, in the middle morning, after the Jap colonel had formally questioned Thode and taken the names of the prisoners, he said to him, "Now I have to put you into a prison camp, but I would like to give you a choice because there are three camps in this area. I will give you my sergeant major and you can personally inspect the camps with him and select the one you like best."

When the others heard the news, and heard again from Thode that he had chosen a Dutch Army camp near the port and that they would all enter camp in the afternoon, Coyne said gloomily, "Someone will kick me soon—and I'll wake up."

It was a prophecy Gosden and the others were to remember later when they were existing under the sadism of Korean guards, and of Japanese not so friendly and considerate as the English-speaking colonel and his men.

## Saturday: The Hills

O WEN'S LAND PARTY WATCHED THE LIFEBOAT pull out from Labuan, with Thode, Gosden and the rest on board. Then, as they went into the village carrying their wounded, a native told them in broken English that the *wadana*—the district chief appointed by the Dutch—wanted to see them.

The native led them to a compound with the main village house in the center, and gave them a bucket of cold tea and left them. The house was of one story, with a broad, open thatch-covered veranda, and on poles outside the house small Japanese flags drooped in the sticky air. Around the compound, and shading its edges, were war-ings—the spreading fig trees which the Javanese believe shelter the souls of the dead. And under the trees were 200 village men, who either ignored the Australians or stared at them without expression, though individuals here and there approached them and spat.

The Australians sat on the powdered-coral-covered ground, and drank the tea and waited. They were Owen, Burgess, Gordon, Black, Nelson, Woodley, John Martin, William Roberts, Neil Biddel, Gordon Dvorak, Noble, Ryan and a dozen more. And every man, looking at the villagers and the Japanese flags, felt that escape ended here.

They waited, and gradually the village men left the com-



pound, and when they had all gone the *wadana* came from the house. He wore a sarong, a linen coat and a silk shirt open at the neck, and a black velvet cap—the Malay *songkok*. He was young and copper-skinned, with thin graceful hands and polished nails and the manners of a courtier.

As Owen rose to meet him he bowed and said in a voice of extreme gentleness, "We wait for Japanese. We have news they come at eleven, but it is now noon. They not come, so I send men away. Come with me, please."

He took Owen inside his house—into a big office equipped with a desk, chairs, a patched carpet, a radio and a typewriter. And in the office was a bulky woman of perhaps fifty-five who looked Samoan but was in European clothes—a dark-blue dress and black shoes and stockings—and wore her graying hair combed to a bun at the back. Her face was heavily lined. Her eyes were black-brown and kind. Her expression was calm and proud. It was a face, Owen thought, which displayed wisdom and humanity—a face of great dignity and understanding.

This was the woman the American sailors christened Eliza.

She held out her hand and said in English, "How do you do?" and Owen told her his name and the circumstances that had brought them to Labuan.

She said, in a voice calm and compassionate, "I am very sorry that it should all end this way for you Australians who have come here to help us. The *wadana* is a very good man—a just and kindly man—and he would very much like to help you. But he cannot now offend the Japanese on whom he and his people will depend for their livelihood. Things are bad around here. A railway runs between here

and Batavia, but all the bridges are down and all the bad men from the hills have come down and caused much trouble in the coastal villages. They have killed, burned, and looted the food stores. We have never grown enough rice for ourselves, and now we are very short of food."

"I understand," Owen said, "and naturally we don't want to embarrass the *wadana* and his people. We want to get away, but we have two badly wounded men. Can you do anything for them?"

"I'm already having stretchers made so that you can carry them. The *wadana* does not want any of you to stay here because the Japanese are coming."

"That's very kind of you and I thank you," Owen said.

Then he asked, "But you are not of these people. You're not Sundanese or Javanese?"

"No," she said. "I'm a Filipino. I came here with my husband thirty years ago, and stayed on when he died to continue his work. He was a Roman Catholic missionary."

Eliza rose and took down a roll of calico from a shelf behind the desk.

"It is bad for you to be as you are," she said, looking at Owen's only clothes, his filthy underpants. "Many of you, like yourself, are not properly dressed. I will first start making headdresses to protect you all from the sun. We are not far from the Equator, as you know."

She tore the calico into strips and began to make turbans, and as she worked she said, "It is unfortunate, but our people do not like you. Men from one of your ships called here last week and were insulting to our girls. They also stole fowls. They caused bad feeling. That is why some

of our men spit at you and insult you. We are generally courteous to strangers."

"Were they men from an Australian ship?" Owen asked.

"Yes, they were."

When she had made the turbans, she said, "Now please bring your wounded boys next door and we will try to help them."

They carried the wounded to the dispensary, where Eliza and two natives trained in first aid dressed their wounds and treated men with sore feet. Then she gave many of the *Perth* men cotton football sweaters—yellow and black and blue and white—shorts, and even sand shoes, before handing Owen a cake of soap.

"Your men can all wash at the well in the compound, and when they are clean I will give them some tea."

In the late afternoon she called to Owen from the *wadana's* veranda. He went to her.

"Will you now move on?" She spoke very softly.

"Can't we stay the night?" he pleaded. "We're all exhausted, and it will take eight of us to carry the wounded."

She went in to the *wadana*, who agreed they could sleep on the veranda.

"But," she said, "you must go on in the morning."

At dusk, when the *wadana* ate at a table on the veranda, he called Owen. "We have little food, but I would like you to share this with me."

He handed him a plate of rice and chicken, but Owen shook his head. "Thank you, but I don't want to take your food."

The *wadana* insisted. "You must."

"Very well," Owen said, "but I'd like the wounded to have it."

He carried the plate to the wounded men, and ate a small piece of chicken liver with them.

Later, the Australians lay on the veranda and Eliza brought them blankets. They all slept almost immediately, but at nine o'clock every man sat up when the radio in the house was turned on.

The *wadana* came out and beckoned Owen. "You might like to hear this. It is Japanese news in English."

Owen followed the *wadana* to the office, and was just in time to hear the announcer say, "Java has fallen and the Japanese Fleet will soon be in Darwin. Resistance everywhere has completely collapsed, and the gallant Japanese Army and Navy have been victorious everywhere. His Imperial Majesty exalts the fighting spirit of his forces. . . ."

The two men looked at each other. Eliza watched them. Owen felt suddenly beaten, and the inner voice again cried out like someone in pain, "God, no more."





Yet he knew he must still try to escape, must go on. He slid a hand down his sweating face, and felt one of his eyelids begin to flicker. The *wadana* said very gently, "You see why you must go in the morning. So you will not be attacked by villagers, who will protect you from hillmen, I give you a letter."

He handed Owen a school slate with a message written in chalk, and a string to hang the slate round his neck.

"It is a letter to the *wadana* of the next village—the village of Menes," Eliza said. "When he reads this he will give you food and help your wounded. We want you also to carry a white flag on a pole we will give you. It will protect you and be a guide to the natives you will meet."

The *wadana* then opened an old leather purse and took out five guilders in ten-cent pieces and handed them to Owen.

"Ten cents," Eliza explained, "will buy you enough coconuts for you all at each village."

"I wish I could help more," the *wadana* added. "But I cannot."

He held out his hand and Owen gripped it. "Good night," the *wadana* said. "Good luck to you!"

At nine o'clock next morning they put the wounded on the stretchers and headed out of Labuan. But before they left Owen went back to the veranda, where Eliza was standing, and took her hand. "Thank you for everything you have done. We Australians will never forget you. God bless you for your kindness!"

"God protect you boys, and guide you!" she said.

And her eyes filled with tears and overflowed.

Carrying the wounded they walked all day into the hills,

and whenever they showed the slate to natives they received tea and tapioca root, and for the first time since they landed on Java the natives were friendly.

At dusk, when all around them thunderstorms were muttering, and when they reached Menes, only six miles from Labuan, Owen showed the slate to a native who took them to the local *wadana*. This man led them to a stone hospital at one end of the village where a Javanese doctor welcomed them and gave them tea and rice and blankets. They slept that night on the cement floor of the hospital, 1500 feet above the sea, and in the morning all had a bath before starting again.

Before they left the doctor said, "I have arranged for four bearers to carry your stretchers, because it will be difficult for you to cross the river without their aid. Good luck!"

The bearers carried the wounded to the river and took the party across on log rafts tied together with rope. Then the natives waved good-by and returned to the village.

Slowly the Australians climbed into the hills—up a road with jungle on one side and rice terraces on the other, up toward the clouds banked like castles above them.

In an hour a car passed them and stopped and a little Javanese in a filthy suit jumped out and ran back. He seemed pleased to see them. "Who are you? Can I help?" he asked in English.

Owen told him the old story and asked where they could find the Dutch. "We all want to go on fighting," he explained.

The little man nodded excitedly. Each time he nodded

his hair fell over his eyes and he swept it back with a filthy paw.

"The Dutch are very near," he said. "Keep walking up the road, and I will go ahead and tell them you are coming."

"Thank God, we're getting somewhere at last!" Burgess said, wiping the sweat off his face.

The Javanese drove off and they continued climbing until they reached a small village of a dozen huts just off the road. The *wadana*, an old man wearing a scarlet and black headdress, bowed when he read the slate, asked them to sit on his veranda, and poured them tea in fine porcelain cups.

They sat and rested, drinking their tea and studying the *wadana* and twenty other old men sitting with him. The old men picked their teeth and spat, and the betel juice splashes were like blood on the veranda. Owen did not want to move. He was so tired he never wanted to move again. But, remembering the Japanese broadcast the night before, and thinking the Dutch were perhaps round the next bend, he said at last, "We'd better be moving on."

But as he got to his feet and went to thank the *wadana*, five cars squealed to a stop in the road outside the village and twenty Japanese soldiers in tin hats and carrying rifles and fixed bayonets surrounded the *wadana's* house and set up two machine guns on the grass below the veranda.

"Here it is, boys," Owen said. "Put up your hands."

The Australians lined up on the edge of the veranda. Burgess was beside Owen. Woodley was next. A Japanese sergeant climbed the steps, saw the knife Burgess carried, and ripped the lanyard with his bayonet. A tall, thin, pale-

faced officer followed the sergeant but ignored the prisoners as his troops searched them. And behind the officer came the little Javanese in the dirty suit, grinning like a baboon.

"It's floggin' Mickey Mouse," someone said. "We should've known."

The officer produced a scroll with red and white tabs and a red seal dangling from it, and read the proclamation which Mickey Mouse interpreted to the *wadana* and the other old men. Then the officer and all the soldiers returned to the cars and, without another glance at the prisoners, drove down the road.

The Australians waited. They just lay on the veranda and waited—expecting the worst. They heard the shrill chattering of the old men, but the words they did not understand were only a backdrop to their thoughts. The Australians did not talk because they could not say the things they were thinking. They waited, watching the clouds high above the trees, and the hills around and above them, and the evening lightning flickered along the edges of the castled cumulus.

Then, just at dusk, pony carts pulled by little Timor ponies drew up, and a young Javanese with a Japanese arm band ordered them into the carts.

As they drove up the road Owen felt the awful wordless silence of defeat enfolding him, enfolding them all. The strength that had saved him in the water, on the island, on the long march from the coast to the hills now seemed to falter. He felt that his very blood, thinned and pale from privation, was draining from his body, leaving him dry and husklily and incredibly tired and old. He listened to the



wheels arguing with the road, and then they seemed to be grinding inside his head, and he thought, Where are they taking us? and he said to Burgess who was hunched beside him, "It's finish for all of us now," and Burgess nodded, and he added, "What an ending this is! I don't suppose our wives and families will ever hear about us again."

They kept on driving, swaying and bumping up the road, and the night came down black as bitumen, and the fireflies were like electric lights along the paddy terraces. The pony-cart drivers lighted big palm-leaf torches and held them outside the carts, and the glare lay on their coppery faces and on the pale backsides of the straining, sweating ponies, and the smell of burning palm leaf filled the night air like incense.



May 11, 1952

THESE THEN WERE THE TEN, GATHERED FROM the sea and from the land, but their capture was both an end and a beginning. Ahead, in jungle and in snow, in paddy flatlands and in high places, were four still unimaginable years of brutality in its many sadistic and peculiarly Japanese forms. Ahead, too, were the dead, men who should have died, men murdered just as efficiently with bacteria and lack of food as with boots and rifle butts and samurai swords. And the dead, marking the days, the months and the years with their lonely mounds in lonely places were like a calendar for the living trying not to die.

Most of the ten began their long captivity at Serang, the big trading center fifty miles west of Batavia, and only a few miles inland from where H.M.A.S. *Perth* and they fought their last dark battle. They were imprisoned in the town jail and the town cinema, but one of them, Owen, has since spoken into a notebook of mine these words: "If I ever go to hell I don't expect to find anything new there—after Serang."

Some remember the gray stone wall of the jail, high and waterstained and splashed with moss like dermatitis; the big double wooden gates under the arched entrance; the big rectangular courtyard with a well in the center and stunted cypress trees—the emblem of mourning—at the cor-

ners; the cells enclosing this courtyard—cells with wood doors and covered iron grills like blank faces along one side, cells with steel-barred doors along the other . . .

. . . twenty, thirty and more exhausted, sick men packed into space for six and eight; the sweet death smell of dried blood and pus and sweat; their own excreta in a cut-down barrel, their only latrine, which they poured through the cell bars into a gutter, already full, which edged the cobbles of the courtyard . . .

. . . the rice, gray and hard and cold, heaped like dirty snow on the cobbles among the fly-blackened filth; the decapitated fish heads among the rice leering up at them with cold glazed eyes; the cup of water daily from the green and almost empty well. . . .

Others remember the filthy stone floor of the cinema where 1,500 men, mostly naked and all near-starving, existed in space designed for perhaps 500; the reek of wounds and vomit and dry fuel oil and unwashed bodies, and the gray smell of polluted cement; the flies rising like brass bands every time men used the open pit latrine in the enclosed courtyard at one side of the cinema; the machine gun watching from the theater balcony; the Japanese officer kicking wounded men and bashing others, and strutting with drawn revolver among the helpless whites, chattering and threatening, like a malignant frog. . . .

These are some of the things the *Perth* men remembered before they moved on—to Changi jail in Singapore, to the Burma railway and the rifle butts of guards and the monsoon's lash, to Siam and the heat waves shuddering above the paddies in the dry, to Japan itself and the copper mines of the bitter north.

They were hungry and wasted, beaten and ill, homesick and desperate, but in four years the Japanese could not break them. They were the undefeated. And at last the scattered ten came home and went their different ways.

Then, on May 11, 1952, more than ten years after the Battle of Sunda Strait, Owen, Davis, Lyons, Woods, Stening, Gillan, Smith, Burgess, Gosden and Campbell met at my flat at Trelawney Street, Woollahra, Sydney.

It was a unique gathering for many reasons.

This was the first time the ten had ever been together in one room.

It was the first time I had ever seen them together, though I had spent long hours with them individually, listening and questioning and filling notebook after notebook with their memories.

Some had not seen each other since the night *Perth* went down on February 28-March 1, 1942, or since they were behind the bars of Serang.

And some had never seen one another before.

In a room blue with cigarette smoke, and as a chill west-erly hammered at the windows, they listened to this story—their story—and it was the first time they had heard it in all its grim and brave totality. I was in a curious position. I knew more about what had happened to *Perth* and to them in Sunda Strait and afterward than they did themselves—and yet I had not been there.

I had brought them all together, from Collaroy and Bellevue Hill, from Ryde and Paddington and other Sydney suburbs, so that they might hear their story and check its accuracy, for, as I explained to them, this was history. All day they listened to stories they would perhaps have liked



to forget, but can never forget. They argued over points and naval words, questioned my descriptions, made suggestions, checked, checked and counterchecked. But men in a group like this are shy. Listening could not have been easy for them. The room was too full of painful memories and emotional ghosts brought close again out of the past and turned into words that can never convey what it feels like to watch a friend die in the water or watch yourself fading from malnutrition or rotting slowly from disease.

Their listening that day was detached yet strangely concentrated, as though they had heard the tale before but dared not miss one word that would break the spell of those moments from the past, when the frail reality of living and the reality of dying were so close as to be almost one and the same thing. Occasionally one would say, "No, it wasn't exactly like that," or another, "It happened when the second torpedo hit," or a third, "I never knew that." And so on, hour after hour, until we came to the end at last and they stretched their legs and lighted fresh cigarettes and the tension of long, cooped listening to the story of their own survival faded from their faces.

Watching them that day, facing them as a group for the first time, I saw them as not exclusively the men of H.M.A.S. *Perth*, of a ship which died that night in Sunda Strait, but as the sailors of *Yarra*, of *Parramatta*, of *Sydney*, of many another ship which never returned to port. I saw the ten as symbols of all those men who left desks and counters and machines and farms to serve and die and live to remember, symbols of the Royal Australian Navy itself and the country which fathered them.

But there is still another thing. *Perth's* Battle of Sunda

Strait was not a victory, it was a defeat; but Gallipoli, too, was a defeat, and so was Dunkirk. Yet defeat can spawn greater things than victory can. It was only after Gallipoli that we felt the first faint stirrings of consciousness as Australians, and it is from the hopeless gallantry of actions like *Perth's* last battle that we can draw new faith in our oneness as a people, fresh confirmation of our integrity.

This is why the ten men, and all they represent, are important. Their story is our story. It is a tradition on which we can build.



### RECORD OF HONOR

There were 682 men in H.M.A.S. *Perth* when she fought the Battle of Sunda Strait—45 officers, 632 petty officers and men, and 6 R.A.A.F. officers and men.

In the battle 23 officers, and 330 petty officers and men, were killed, and 100 petty officers and men died in Japanese prisoner of war camps. No officers died while prisoners of war.

Of the original 682 in *Perth*, only 229 returned to Australia at the end of the war.

## APPENDIX I

### REPORTS\* ON THE BATTLE OF THE JAVA SEA, FEBRUARY 27, 1942

#### *Report A*

Report of March 17, 1942, to the Commander-in-Chief, Eastern Fleet, by the Commodore Commanding China Force, Commodore J. A. Collins, C.B., R.A.N.—now Vice-Admiral Sir John Collins, First Naval Member and Chief of Staff, Australian Commonwealth Naval Board.

1. Attached brief account of the naval action off Surabaya on February 27 is based on:

(a) A written report of the action by the Captain of *Perth* compiled from his own report notes on the forenoon of February 28 and handed to Commodore Commanding China Force at Batavia on *Perth's* arrival at that port. This was only a rough initial report.

(b) Report from senior surviving officer of *Jupiter*.

(c) Report from senior surviving officer of *Electra*.

(d) Informal conversation with Captains of *Perth* and *Houston* during the afternoon of February 28 at Batavia. No track charts or plots are available and this report is necessarily incomplete.

\* These reports were originally published in the Supplement to the *London Gazette* of July 6, 1948.

2. The Eastern Striking Force was formed at Surabaya\* on February 26 under the command of Admiral Doorman in *De Ruyter*. It consisted of:

Cruisers:

*De Ruyter* (Flagship) and *Java* (Dutch), *Exeter* (British), *Houston* (U.S.), *Perth* (Australian).

Destroyers:

*Electra*, *Encounter* and *Jupiter* (British), *Kortenaer* and *Witte de With* (Dutch), *Edwards*, *Alden*, *Ford* and *Paul Jones* (U.S.).

3. This force proceeded to sea 1830/26th† and steered to the eastward along the north coast of Madura Island until 0100/27th, then to the westward until 0930/27th. Nothing was sighted during the night. The force was shadowed by enemy aircraft from 0855/27th until it entered the Surabaya swept channel at 1330/27th, but was only attacked twice by single aircraft.

4. At 1427 an enemy report was received of a convoy in the vicinity of Bawean Island. The striking force reversed its course and proceeded to intercept.

5. At 1614 enemy forces were sighted consisting of two 8-in. cruisers, Nachi class, preceded by two 6-in. cruisers of Sendai class and 13 destroyers in two groups. The order of battle of the Allied cruisers was *De Ruyter*, *Exeter*, *Houston*, *Perth* and *Java*, speed 26 knots. They were preceded by a screen of the 3 British destroyers and followed by the Dutch and U.S. destroyers.

\* A Western Striking Force, under the command of Commodore J. A. Collins, R.A.N., and composed of "D" class cruisers and "S" class destroyers of the Royal Navy, was based at Batavia.

† Times quoted in this report are in local, that is, Java time, which is G.M.T. 7½ hours.



At 1616 enemy 8-in. cruisers opened fire at a range of 30,000 yards on *Exeter* and *Houston*. *De Ruyter* led round and action was engaged on parallel courses at a range of 26 to 28,000 yards, at which ranges only our 8-in. cruisers could reply. The enemy's gunfire was extremely accurate; the average spread was estimated at 150 yards for elevation, firing 10-gun salvos.

6. The rear enemy destroyer flotilla moved in to attack soon after action was joined. One destroyer was hit by gunfire from *Perth* and the flotilla retired behind smoke.

7. At 1707, enemy destroyers, probably of the leading flotilla, delivered a long-range torpedo attack. At 1714 *Exeter* received a hit from an 8-in. shell in one boiler room and turned away, reducing to slow speed which later was increased to 15 knots. *De Ruyter* held her course for a short time, but the remaining cruisers turned away after *Exeter*. *De Ruyter* then conformed and American destroyers assisted to screen *Exeter* with smoke and the Allied line was thrown into considerable confusion. About 1715 Japanese torpedoes reached the Allied line; *Kortenaer* was struck by a torpedo in the engine room and sank.

8. By 1725 the Allied cruiser line (except *Exeter*) had been straightened again on a N.E. course but was partially screened from the enemy by smoke. *Exeter* was retiring to Surabaya on course 150° at 15 knots. At this moment Admiral Doorman ordered the British destroyers to counterattack.

9. *Electra*, *Encounter* and *Jupiter* were widely separated and proceeded to attack independently.

*Electra* led through the smoke in the direction of the enemy and on clearing it sighted an enemy unit of 3 heavy

destroyers on opposite courses going into the smoke, range about 6000 yards. *Electra* engaged and claims four hits on the leading ship, but as the unit disappeared into the smoke a shell struck *Electra* in No. 2 boiler room and shattered the boiler. Steam was lost and *Electra* stopped. Shortly after, a single enemy heavy destroyer emerged from the smoke and the engagement continued, *Electra* firing in local control with all bridge communication dead. *Electra* was repeatedly hit and her guns silenced one by one. When only one gun remained in action the order to "abandon ship" was given. *Electra* sank about 1800.

10. *Jupiter* on emerging through the smoke sighted two enemy destroyers which were engaged for a short period before they disappeared. No further target being in sight *Jupiter* returned to the Allied cruisers where she was joined by *Encounter*. *Encounter* attacked through a clearing in the smoke, but no details or results of the attack are known.

11. From 1725 to 1745 the cruiser forces were screened from each other by smoke. Japanese gunfire through the smoke, presumably controlled by radar, is reported as accurate. Japanese aircraft were employed on spotting throughout the action.

12. At 1745 Allied cruisers emerged from smoke on opposite course to the enemy 8-in. cruisers at ranges down to 21,000 yards. The action continued spasmodically until 1812, several hits being claimed on the enemy cruisers.

At 1812, the enemy cruisers turned away under cover of smoke, the rear ship heavily on fire aft. When the smoke cleared *Perth* states "target appeared to be stopped, the bow rose in the air, then seemed to settle back. We then lost

sight of her, whether because she sank or whether the light failed I do not know."

By 1830 no enemy forces were in sight.

### *Night Action.*

13. In gathering darkness *De Ruyter* continued to lead the cruisers to the N.E. and northward, presumably in an attempt to work round the enemy forces and reach the convoy. At 1927 four ships were sighted to the westward and engaged for a few minutes at 9000 yards range; simultaneously Allied force was illuminated by enemy aircraft flares. *Perth* turned away to avoid suspected torpedoes; the remainder of the force conformed.

14. It seems probable that Admiral Doorman decided it was impracticable to work round the enemy to the northward and that better results might be achieved by getting between him and the Java coast and working round to the southward, for about 1945 he altered course to 170°. This course was continued until about 2035 when ships reached very shallow water near Kodok Point to the West of Surabaya Strait. *De Ruyter* then turned to the westward, keeping about four miles from the coast.

15. At about 2100 in position 06° 45.2'S., 112° 05.5'E. a violent explosion occurred in *Jupiter* who was following astern of *Java*, the rear cruiser. The explosion is attributed by *Jupiter* to a torpedo [now believed to have been a Dutch-laid mine], occurred on the starboard side abreast the forward bulkhead of the engine room and immobilized the ship. No signs of a submarine or of torpedo tracks were

sighted from *Jupiter* who remained unmolested until she sank four hours later. A large number of survivors landed on the north coast of Java from ship's boats and Carley floats. The weather at time of sinking was—wind east force 2, sky and visibility b 7 miles, sea and swell 21.\*

16. From 2150 onward the Allied cruiser force was continuously shadowed and frequently illuminated by aircraft dropping flares. All alterations of course were signaled by dropping flares, and occasionally by lines of floating calcium flares placed across the track of the ships. Under these conditions a surprise attack on the enemy convoy seemed out of the question.

17. At 2330 contact was made with two cruisers on the port beam of the Allied force which was then steering to the northward, though its exact position is not known. Range was about 9000 yards. Enemy opened fire, followed by *Perth*; the enemy fire was extremely accurate but very slow. *Perth* claimed that two or three salvos hit, then star shell falling short concealed the target. One enemy shell hit *De Ruyter* on the quarter-deck and *De Ruyter* turned 90° away, remaining cruisers conforming.

18. When the line was halfway round this turn a violent explosion occurred in the after part of *Java* and she stopped heavily on fire. She was not under gunfire at the time. At about the same moment *De Ruyter*, who had completed the 90° turn, also blew up with an appalling explosion and settled aft heavily on fire.† *Perth* avoided the blazing wreck

\* Wind force 2—light air to light breeze 1-6 m.p.h.; sky b—less than 3/10 cloud; sea and swell 21—practically calm.

† Both Dutch cruisers were sunk by torpedo fire from the *Nachi* and *Haguro* (Japanese 5th Cruiser Division).



by the use of full port rudder and one engine. *Houston* headed out to starboard.

19. Admiral Doorman's verbal orders to his force before sailing had been that any ship disabled "must be left to the mercy of the enemy," to quote his own words. The Allied force now consisted only of *Perth* and *Houston*, the latter with very little ammunition and her after turret out of action from previous bombing. No destroyers remained in company.\*

No further reconnaissance reports of the enemy convoy had been received since nightfall. The Allied cruisers were under continual air observation and illumination by flares. To continue the action was clearly hopeless and *Perth* had no hesitation in deciding to withdraw the remnants of the striking force. *Houston* was ordered to follow and course was shaped at high speed for Tanjong Priok.

20. The withdrawal was not opposed by enemy surface forces. *Houston* and *Perth* were located by enemy reconnaissance aircraft A.M. 28 when within 60 miles of Priok. In response to a "Help" call from *Perth*, fighter aircraft were sent out from Batavia and escorted the cruisers in; no air attack developed on them. They arrived at Priok at 1330.

21. It should be noted that throughout this action the Allied forces suffered from communication difficulties. The force as a whole had never acted before as a tactical unit.

\* The U.S. destroyers delivered torpedo attacks on the Japanese cruisers at 1814 and 1819 in which they fired all their torpedoes. At 2100, owing to their fuel supply running low and lack of torpedoes, their Senior Officer withdrew them to Surabaya to refuel and obtain new torpedoes, thus anticipating a signal to do so made half an hour later by Rear-Admiral Doorman.

Visual signaling was restricted to simple signals in English by flashing lamp in Morse Code. British Liaison Officers with small signal staffs were on board *De Ruyter* and *Java*, but it had not been practicable to adopt a common system of flag signaling.

### *Report B*

Report by the Commanding Officer of H.M.A.S. *Perth*  
(Captain H. M. L. Waller, D.S.O., R.A.N.).

#### Action Narrative—Day and Night Action Off Surabaya, February 27, 1942. (All times zone—7½)

At about 1425 the Striking Force was approaching the mine fields off Surabaya. Squadron consisted of *De Ruyter* (Flag), *Exeter*, *Houston*, *Perth*, *Java*, *Electra*, *Encounter*, *Jupiter*, two Dutch destroyers and four U.S. destroyers. The force was returning from an abortive sweep carried out the night before.

2. At 1427 a message was received giving the position of the convoy in the vicinity of Bawean Island.

*De Ruyter* immediately turned 180° and led the force off to intercept. British destroyers were spread ahead, Dutch on the port quarter and U.S. destroyers astern. The order of the cruisers was as in paragraph 1. *Houston's* after turret was out of action due to a previous bombing attack.

3. At 1550 squadron was on course 315°, 24 knots. At 1614 enemy cruiser was sighted on starboard bow. Speed

was increased to 26 knots. Enemy now appeared as two 8-in. cruisers (Natai class) and ahead of them was one cruiser (Zintu class) and six destroyers (Asahio class). At 1616 the enemy 8-in. cruisers opened fire at a range of 30,000 yards, directing their fire mostly on *Exeter* and *Houston*. *Zintu* opened fire about the same time on *Electra*, at 1617 *Exeter* opened fire, *Houston* at 1618.

4. *De Ruyter* led round about 20° to port and range of 8-in. cruisers remained at about 26,000 to 28,000 yards for some time. *Perth* could not open fire as the range was outside extreme, but at about 1625 *Perth* opened fire on the right-hand destroyers (the destroyers appeared to be moving in preparatory to attack). The second salvo hit, but immediately this destroyer and the others made smoke and retired behind a very effective screen with the cruisers. Several "follow up" salvos were fired into the smoke.

5. *De Ruyter* now led round to starboard. Enemy long range-fire was extremely accurate, mostly pitching very close short or over. The spread was incredibly small, never more than 150 yards for elevation and much less for line. They were ten-gun salvos with extremely small splashes.

Enemy aircraft were overhead the whole time, no doubt spotting.

6. At 1635 *De Ruyter* led toward the enemy on course 267°. About this time the rear enemy cruiser was evidently hit in the boiler room as she emitted very large clouds of black smoke for some time, but continued firing. As the smoke cleared one enemy destroyer was seen to be on fire, and *Perth* now came under a very accurate fire from the rear cruiser for a long period. The other cruiser was firing straight at *Exeter* and *Houston*. *Perth* was straddled sev-

eral times and the salvos rarely fell less than one cable over or short. Every effort was made in handling the ship to estimate the correction the enemy would use.

7. The rear enemy cruiser was now on fire. *Perth* was still out of range of enemy cruisers and I found a long period of being "Aunt Sally" very trying without being able to return the fire. (Range was still over 26,000 yards.) The Dutch cruisers all this while were firing occasionally. At 1700 enemy cruisers checked fire. At 1702, the leading enemy cruiser appeared to be hit aft but both cruisers opened fire again. At 1707 the leading enemy destroyers delivered a long-range torpedo attack and Allied cruisers had to turn away to let torpedoes comb the line. Allied cruisers ceased fire. Enemy still firing but shots falling short. At 1714 *Exeter* stopped and reported hit in boiler room. She shortly proceeded at 15 knots and I closed her and screened her with funnel smoke and all available smoke floats. While doing this the Admiral made "All ships follow me" but I continued to smoke-screen *Exeter* and reported her damage to the Admiral, who told me by V/S\* to follow him, when I proceeded to do so.

8. At 1715 an Allied destroyer (I think *Electra*) suddenly blew up close ahead of me,† having, I think, been struck in the engine room by a torpedo. She capsized and dived under in a few seconds, then broke in halves, the two ends floating for some time. At 1718 *Perth's* pom-poms opened fire at a reported periscope. By 1721 some of our destroyers were screening *Exeter* with smoke and others apparently attacking through the smoke. *Exeter* was steer-

\* V/S—visual signal.

† The destroyer in question was the Dutch *Kortenaer*.



ing 130°, having been ordered to Surabaya, and *Perth* was trying to drive off spotting aircraft.

9. At 1725 Allied cruisers were led by the Admiral between *Exeter* and the enemy, presumably to draw their fire. Anyway, it did this and gave *Exeter* a breathing space and a chance to get out of the area. At 1729, *De Ruyter* led away to the southward; enemy cruisers were still firing very accurately. At 1745, Allied cruisers were again in single line ahead (except *Exeter*) and emerged from the smoke screen on opposite course to the enemy 8-in. cruisers. (Enemy in sight were now the three cruisers and only five destroyers.)

Whilst passing behind the smoke screen after circling *Exeter*, I was under a very accurate 8-in. fire continuously, although obviously the enemy could not see me. It was presumably radar control. At 1750 *Exeter* fired one salvo. At 1752 the enemy destroyers once more moved in to attack and *Perth* was firing on destroyers as they came into view in gaps in the smoke screen; the destroyers also peppered me for some minutes. At 1810 no Allied cruisers were firing, but there were several destroyer duels going on.

10. At 1812 our destroyers retired and I found myself on opposite course to the two 8-in. cruisers at a range of 21,000 yards and engaged the right-hand ship. After getting in for line, the target was found and several rapid salvos got in on the target, two of which hit, and one of which caused a very big explosion aft in the target with volumes of bright lavalike emissions and a pink smoke. Both enemy cruisers then retired behind this smoke and a funnel smoke screen. When the smoke cleared away our target

appeared to be stopped, the bow rose in the air and then seemed to settle back. We then lost sight of her, whether because she sank or whether the light failed I do not know.

11. During this engagement, *Houston* was engaged with the left-hand cruiser, *Java* and *De Ruyter* were both firing at something. *Houston* reported to me that she had very little 8-in. ammunition left and I informed the Admiral. By 1830 no enemy were in sight and *De Ruyter* led our forces off to the northeast, and subsequently (presumably) as requisite to try and work round the enemy escort and get at the convoy. Speed 22 knots.

12. At 1927 I sighted four ships on the port beam and reported them. The range was about 9000 yards, and about the same time, what I thought was a star shell but which was an aircraft flare, burst on our disengaged side and I opened fire at 1933 with main armament first, then tried star shell; but these fell short. *Houston* also opened fire; I saw a row of explosions in one ship, but thinking these might be torpedo fire, I turned away, and all ships followed motions. *Jupiter* (on the port bow) moved in probably to counterattack but there was no gunfire.

13. Cruisers then formed up again in line ahead and were led on various courses by *De Ruyter* to intercept. We seemed to drop a couple of destroyers in this last move. The search went on without event (except that we appeared to get into very shallow water), and then one of the American destroyers [it was not an American] blew up with a tremendous explosion and sank. At 2150, another aircraft flare appeared overhead and shortly afterward a line of about 6 brilliant calcium flares in the water straddled our line at right angles. This happened every time we

steered a new course and it was soon obvious that our every move in the moonlight was being reported, not only by W/T but also by this excellent visual means. The enemy's dispositions of his forces must have been ridiculously easy. At 2217 we passed through a very large number of survivors. They did not seem to be English, but may have been either Japanese or Dutch. I do not know yet if any Dutch ships were sunk.

14. At 2230, I sighted two cruisers on the port beam. *Houston* reported them at the same moment. They were a long way off but one of them fired a salvo shortly after I sighted. I immediately opened a heavy fire on him and both cruisers opened up on us. This fire was extremely accurate again but very slow. Two of my salvos at least, and possibly three, struck home (we were spotting by moonlight). The same ship opened up with a stream of star shell and obliterated the target as they fell short. One enemy shell hit *De Ruyter* on the quarter-deck, *De Ruyter* turned 90° away and I followed as I thought he may have seen torpedoes. Whilst the line was halfway round this turn, the whole of *Java's* afterpart blew up and she stopped heavily on fire. She was not under gunfire at that time, so the explosion may have been due to a wandering fire or a torpedo. I suspect we were led over a submarine for almost at the same moment, although she had completed 90° turn, *De Ruyter* blew up with an appalling explosion and settled heavily on fire. I just managed to miss her by the use of full helm and one engine stopped. *Houston* headed out to starboard. By now the American destroyers had been detached to Batavia to refuel, and all other destroyers had disappeared, possibly due to the frequent 90° turns done by

*De Ruyter*. The Admiral's verbal instructions had been that any ship disabled must be left "to the mercy of the enemy," to use his own words. I left *De Ruyter* and *Java*, took *Houston* under my orders, made a feint to the south-east, then turned direct to Batavia at high speed.

15. I had now under my orders one undamaged 6-in. cruiser, one 8-in. cruiser with very little ammunition and no guns aft. I had no destroyers. The force was subjected throughout the day and night operations to the most superbly organized air reconnaissance. I was opposed by six cruisers, one of them possibly sunk, and twelve destroyers. By means of their air reconnaissance they had already played cat and mouse with the main striking force and I saw no prospect of getting at the enemy (their movements had not reached me since dark, and even then the several reports at the same time all gave different courses).

16. It was fairly certain that the enemy had at least one submarine operating directly with him [there were no submarines, according to Japanese reports], and he had ample destroyers to interpose between the convoy and my approach—well advertised as I knew it would be.

I had therefore no hesitation in withdrawing what remained of the striking force and ordering them to the pre-arranged rendezvous after night action—Tanjong Priok.



## APPENDIX II

### REPORT ON THE BATTLE OF SUNDA STRAIT, FEBRUARY 28-MARCH 1, 1942

The following report on the Battle of Sunda Strait by Lieutenant-Commander J. A. Harper, R.N., was sent to the Naval Board, Melbourne, on October 1, 1945, and is printed with the permission of Vice-Admiral Sir John Collins.

I have the honor to submit herewith a report on the final action and loss of H.M.A.S. *Perth* (Captain H. M. L. Waller, D.S.O., R.A.N.). All times given are local time (zone—7½).

2. *Perth* and U.S.S. *Houston* arrived at Tanjong Priok, after the day and night actions off Surabaya on February 27, 1942, during the afternoon of February 28, *Perth* securing alongside in 2nd Harbor at about 1430, and *Houston* in 3rd Harbor shortly afterward. It was hoped to complete with oil fuel, but unfortunately stocks of fuel ashore were very low. The authorities wished to retain some fuel against an emergency (the fate of most of the destroyers of the Allied Force was still unknown and some, at least, of these were expected to arrive at Tanjong Priok shortly), and so *Perth* was allowed to embark only 300 tons. This brought us to little over 50 per cent full stowage.

3. It was found that preparations were being made to

destroy all warehouses and harbor installations, so the opportunity was taken of embarking any stores which could be found close to the ship and which might prove useful. These included a lot of victualing stores addressed to the V.S.O. at Singapore, two small fire engines and about two dozen wood merchant ships' lifesaving rafts. The latter proved most valuable a few hours later.

4. Orders had been received to sail at 1800, but shortly before this time the air-raid warning was sounded and all native laborers took shelter, so it was impossible to get the fueling hoses disconnected. A Japanese plane flew close in to the harbor on a reconnaissance, but no actual attack developed.

5. At about 1730 I was sent for by Captain Waller, who had with him the Commanding Officer of U.S.S. *Houston*. Captain Waller informed me that our orders were to proceed (in company with U.S.S. *Houston* and the Dutch destroyer *Evertsen*) through Sunda Strait to Tjilatjap. To avoid air attack it was agreed that we should keep well south of Java (about 200 miles), approaching Tjilatjap during the hours of darkness. As it was necessary to exercise the greatest economy in fuel, it was agreed to proceed at a moderate speed and arrived on Monday morning (March 2). Captain Waller later informed me that we should quite likely receive different orders by W/T the following day, and in his opinion our next port of call would probably be either Fremantle or Colombo.

6. We cast off finally at about 1900, making a signal at the same time to *Evertsen* to precede us out of harbor. She replied that she had received no orders to sail and had not got steam up. We told her to obtain the necessary or-

ders and follow us as soon as possible. We passed through the harbor entrance at 1930, followed closely by *Houston* and proceeded at slow speed through the protective mine fields. The examination vessel was passed at 2100, and course set for Sunda Strait along the searched channel at 22 knots. Zigzag No. 10 was started. *Houston* was stationed five cables astern and ordered to conform with our zigzag.

7. While passing through the protective mine fields a signal was received giving an air reconnaissance report of an enemy convoy about 50 miles northeast of Batavia, steering east at about 1600. The convoy consisted of about 10 merchant vessels, escorted by about 2 cruisers and 3 destroyers—at any rate a fairly small force. Captain Waller remarked to me that this looked like a landing east of Batavia that night and I replied that, with a convoy to look after, it was unlikely that the escort would trouble to look for us, and Captain Waller agreed.

8. On clearing the mine fields night-action stations were assumed and the armament cleared away. Captain Waller then ordered a reversion to 2nd degree of readiness. On taking command of the *Perth* some months previously, Captain Waller had publicly told the Ship's Company that he had been caught napping too often in this war, and as he did not intend to be caught napping again they must expect many false alarms and that he would close up at 1st degree of readiness on the slightest suspicion. From the way in which he had always carried out this policy and from my knowledge of him, I am quite certain that his order to revert to 2nd degree of readiness showed that he had no expectation of encountering enemy forces. He told

me that he had been warned to keep a good lookout for our own patrol vessels in Sunda Strait. Although I do not remember having seen the signal myself, other officers (both from *Perth* and *Houston*) subsequently told me that we had received an air reconnaissance report stating that Sunda Strait was clear of enemy ships shortly before dark.

9. Babi Island Light was abeam to starboard,  $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles, at about 2245. The sea was calm, with little or no wind, a clear sky and a full moon, giving an extreme visibility of six or seven miles.

10. At 2306, when in position  $5^{\circ} 50'S.$ ,  $106^{\circ} 10'E.$  (approx.), a vessel was sighted about 5 miles ahead, close to St. Nicolas Point. It was expected that she was one of our corvettes on patrol in Sunda Strait, but she was challenged by Aldis lamp as a matter of course. A strange reply on a greenish colored lamp was made. The challenge was repeated, at which the vessel turned away and began to make smoke. When her full silhouette was presented to us it was seen that she was a Japanese destroyer. Captain Waller immediately ordered the alarm rattles to be sounded and the forward turrets to open fire. \*

11. Course was altered immediately to bring the full broadside to bear. Shortly afterward other destroyers were sighted to the northward and the armament split so as to engage more than one target at the same time. An enemy report of the first destroyer sighted was made immediately, and later, when an enemy cruiser was sighted, this was amplified to one cruiser. Captain Waller himself handled the ship throughout the action, altering course repeatedly so as to keep the armament bearing on the most suitable target



or targets. *Houston* followed our motions throughout. During the action we actually steamed in a large circle, at one time being forced quite close in to the islands in Bantam Bay.

12. I cannot attempt to estimate what force was opposing us. During the action a large number of destroyers engaged us from all directions; at least one and probably more cruisers were engaging us from the northward, and one officer on the bridge reported sighting a large number of vessels in close formation, probably transports. At about 2340 one set of torpedo tubes was fired from the bridge at a target—I do not know what. The other set was fired before the ship was abandoned, but I do not know if they were fired at a target or not. Due to a large number of enemy destroyers opposing us it was impossible to engage all targets at once, and so some were eventually able to close to a very low range. By about 2350 one or two destroyers were close enough to illuminate us with their searchlights from a range of about 3000 yards.

13. Little damage was caused to *Perth* until the very end of the action. At about 2350 a shell entered the ordinary seamen's mess deck from the starboard side, forward, near the waterline. I observed also a small fire either near the catapult or in the after superstructure, evidently caused by a shell hit at about the same time. It was not until after the order to abandon ship had been given that many shell hits were received.

14. Damage inflicted on the enemy it is impossible to assess. Due to the extreme visibility and consequently the range at which most of the action was fought, it was diffi-

cult to observe the effect of the gunfire. Hits were definitely scored, both by the main and smaller armaments, on some of the destroyers which closed in.

A report on the action published in the *Japan Times Weekly* in about April 1942 indicated that we had caused quite considerable damage to the enemy, both warships and transports, and the transport carrying the general commanding the landing force appears to have been sunk.

15. At about midnight the Gunnery Officer reported to Captain Waller that very little 6-in. ammunition was left, so Captain Waller decided to attempt to force a passage through Sunda Strait. He ordered full speed and altered course direct for Toppers Island. We had barely steadied on the course when the ship was struck by a torpedo on the starboard side abreast the forward boiler room or engine room. The time would have been about 0005, the action having lasted just an hour. Captain Waller's remark was "That's torn it," and he ordered to prepare to abandon ship. A few moments later I drew his attention to a torpedo track approaching from the starboard bow, and this torpedo hit on the starboard side roughly abreast "A" turret. Captain Waller then gave the order to abandon ship. The ship had already started to list to starboard and still had considerable way upon her. After an appreciable interval of five or maybe ten minutes a third torpedo struck well aft on the starboard side. This was followed shortly afterward by a fourth torpedo, which hit on the portside; the ship then righted herself, heeled over to port and sank at about 0025. The ship's position then was approximately  $5^{\circ} 49'S.$ ,  $106^{\circ} 05'E.$  U.S.S. *Houston* was still fighting although badly on

fire. She was hit by torpedoes and sank shortly afterward rather closer inshore.

16. Most people abandoned ship between the second and third torpedoes. I do not think that any boats were successfully launched, but I did observe that the 2nd cutter had been lowered: this boat must have capsized due to the way on the ship. Many Carley rafts and the wood merchant ships' life rafts were launched. While abandoning ship *Perth* was under fire from several destroyers at close range and many hits were scored and casualties caused due to this. The pom-pom ready-use locker on the flag deck was hit and exploded, killing several of the flag deck and bridge personnel, who were descending from the bridge at the time. A hit was also received on the 4-in.-gun deck. Many others were killed or wounded in the water by the explosion of the third and fourth torpedoes and by shells exploding in the water.

17. The above report is compiled from a few brief notes which were made by me six months after the action and which I was able to retain throughout my imprisonment. Impressions of such an action are naturally very confused, and although I was able to discuss it with some officers and men during the ensuing five weeks, I was in no position then to commit any facts to paper. I was then separated from all but four other officers, and it was not until five months later that I was able to note down the few facts I could still remember.

### APPENDIX III

#### THE PART PLAYED BY U.S.S. *HOUSTON* IN THE BATTLES OF THE JAVA SEA AND SUNDA STRAIT

Commander Walter G. Winslow, United States Navy, wrote the following article—the “Galloping Ghost” he called it—on U.S.S. *Houston*’s part in the Battles of the Java Sea and Sunda Strait.

The article appeared in the February 1949 issue of the United States Naval Institute *Proceedings*, Annapolis, Maryland.

It is reprinted here with the permission of the author, Commander Winslow, and the U. S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*.

On the night of February 28, 1942, the U.S.S. *Houston*, Admiral Tommy Hart’s former Asiatic flagship, vanished without a trace somewhere off the Northwest coast of Java. The mystery of the *Houston* remained complete until the war ended and small groups of survivors were discovered in Jap prisoner-of-war camps, scattered from the island of Java through the Malay Peninsula, the jungles of Burma and Thailand, and northward to the Islands of Japan.

Of the 1008 officers and men who manned her, approximately 350 escaped from the sinking ship, only to be captured in the jungles of Java, or as they floundered helplessly



in the sea. Of the original survivors, only 266 lived through the ordeal of filth and brutal treatment meted out to them in Japanese prisoner-of-war camps.

To me the story of the U.S.S. *Houston*, especially the last three weeks of her valiant battle against tremendous odds, is one of the great epics of the United States Navy, yet historians of World War II seem to have neglected it completely.

What happened to the *Houston* that night is a nightmare of many years' standing, yet each incident of the wild battle lives in my mind as vividly as though it happened only minutes ago.

On that fateful evening of February 28, 1942, I stood on the quarter-deck contemplating the restful green of the Java Coast as it fell slowly behind us. Many times before I had found solace in its beauty, but this night it seemed only a mass of coconut and banana palms that had lost all meaning. I was too tired and preoccupied with pondering the question that raced through the mind of every man aboard. "Would we get through Sunda Strait?"

There were many aboard who felt that, like a cat, the *Houston* had expended eight of its nine lives and that this one last request of fate would be too much. Jap cruiser planes had shadowed us all day and it was certain that our movements were no mystery to the enemy forces closing in on Java. Furthermore, it was most logical to conclude that Jap submarines were stationed throughout the length of Sunda Strait to intercept and destroy ships attempting escape into the Indian Ocean.

Actually there wasn't any breathing space for optimism. We were trapped, but there had been other days when the

odds were stacked heavily in the Jap's favor and we had somehow managed to battle through. Maybe it was because I had the Naval Aviator's philosophical outlook and maybe it was because I was just a plain damn fool, but I couldn't quite bring myself to believe that the *Houston* had run her course. It was with this feeling of shaky confidence that I turned and headed for my stateroom. I had just been relieved as officer of the deck and the prospect of a few hours' rest was most appealing.

The wardroom and the interior of the ship, through which I walked, was dark, for the heavy metal battle ports were bolted shut and lights were not permitted within the darkened ship. Only the eerie blue beams of a few battle lights close to the deck served to guide my feet. I felt my way through the narrow companionway and snapped on my flashlight briefly to seek out the coaming of my stateroom door. As I stepped into the cubicle that was my room, I took a brief look around and switched off the light. There had been no change; everything lay as it had for the last two and a half months. There had been only one addition in all that time. It was Gus, my silent friend, the beautiful Bali head I had purchased six weeks before in Surabaya.

Gus sat on the desk top lending his polished wooden expression to the cramped atmosphere of my stateroom. In the darkness I felt his presence as though he were a living thing. "We'll get through, won't we, Gus?" I found myself saying. And although I couldn't see him, I thought he nodded slowly.

I slipped out of my shoes and placed them at the base of the chair by my desk, along with my tin hat and life jacket, where I could reach them quickly in an emergency. Then

I rolled into my bunk and let my exhausted body sink into its luxury. The bunk was truly a luxury, for the few men who were permitted to relax lay on the steel decks by their battle stations. I, being an aviator with only the battered shell of our last airplane left aboard, was permitted to take what rest I could get in my room.

Although there had been little sleep for any of us during the past four days, I found myself lying there in the sticky tropic heat of my room fretfully tossing and trying for sleep that would not come.

The constant hum of blowers thrusting air into the bowels of the ship, the *Houston's* gentle rolling as she moved through a quartering sea, and the occasional groaning of her steel plates combined to bring into my mind the mad merry-go-round of events that had plagued the ship during the past few weeks.

Twenty-four days had elapsed since that terrifying day in the Flores Sea, yet here it was haunting me again as it would for the rest of my life. My mind pictured the squadrons of Jap bombers as they attacked time and again from every conceivable direction. After the first run they remained in altitudes far beyond range of our antiaircraft guns, for they had learned respect on that first run when one of their planes was blasted from the sky and several others were obviously hit and badly shaken. But that first salvo almost finished the *Houston*. It was a perfect straddle, and the force of those big bombs seemed as though a giant hand had taken the ship, lifted her bodily from the water, and tossed her yards away from her original course. There had been no personnel casualties that time, but our main antiaircraft director had been wrenched from its track, ren-

dering it useless, and we were taking water aboard from sprung plates in the hull.

That day the crew had only the steady barrage from the antiaircraft guns and Captain Rooks's clever handling of the ship to thank for keeping them from the realms of Davy Jones. But there was one horrible period during that afternoon when the Nips almost got us for keeps. A five-hundred-pound bomb, and a stray at that, hit us squarely amidships aft. Some utterly stupid Jap bombardier failed to release with the rest of his squadron and Captain Rooks could make no allowances for such as he. The salvo fell harmlessly off the port quarter but the stray crashed through two platforms of the mainmast before it exploded on the deck just forward of number-three turret. Hunks of shrapnel tore through the turret's thin armor as though it were paper, igniting powder bags in the hoists. In one blazing instant all hands in the turret and in the handling rooms below were dead. Where the bomb spent its force, a gaping hole was blown in the deck below in which waited the after repair party. They were wiped out almost to a man. It was a hellish battle which ended with forty-eight of our shipmates killed and another fifty seriously burned or wounded.

I strove desperately to rid myself of the picture of that blazing turret—the bodies of the dead sprawled grotesquely in pools of blood and the bewildered wounded staggering forward for medical aid—but I was forced to see it through. Once again I heard the banging of hammers, hammers that pounded throughout the long night as tired men worked steadily building coffins for forty-eight shipmates lying in little groups on the fantail. We put into Tjilatjap the fol-



lowing day, that stinking fever-ridden little port on the south coast of Java. Here we sadly unloaded our wounded and prepared to bury our dead. It seemed that in the hum of the blowers I detected strains of the Death March—the same mournful tune that the band played as we carried our comrades through the heat of those sunburned, dusty streets of Tjilatjap. I saw again the brown poker-faced natives dressed in sarongs, quietly watching us as we buried our dead in the little Dutch cemetery that looked out over the sea. I wondered what those slim brown men thought of all this.

The scene shifted. It was only four days ago that we steamed through the mine fields protecting the beautiful port of Surabaya. Air-raid sirens whined throughout the city and our lookouts reported bombers in the distant sky. Large warehouses along the docks were on fire and a burning merchantman lay on its side vomiting dense black smoke and orange flame. The enemy had come and left his calling card. We anchored in the stream not far from the smoldering docks where we watched Netherlands East Indian soldiers extinguish the fires.

Six times during the next two days we experienced air raids. Anchored there in the stream we were as helpless as ducks in a rain barrel. Why our gun crews didn't collapse is a tribute to their sheer guts and brawn. They stood by their guns unflinchingly in the hot sun, pouring shell after shell into the sky while the rest of us sought what shelter is available in the bull's-eye of a target.

Time and again bombs falling with the deep-throated swoosh of a giant bull whip exploded around us, spewing water and shrapnel over our decks. Docks less than a hun-

dred yards away were demolished and a Dutch hospital ship was hit, yet the *Houston*, nicknamed "the Galloping Ghost of the Java Coast" because the Japs had reported her sunk on so many similar occasions, still rode defiantly at anchor.

When the siren's baleful wailing sounded the "all clear," members of the *Houston's* band came from their battle stations to the quarter-deck where we squatted to hear them play swing tunes. God bless the American sailor, you can't beat him.

Like Scrooge, the ghosts of the past continued to move into my little room; I saw us in the later afternoon of February 26, standing out of Surabaya for the last time. Admiral Doorman of the Netherlands Navy was in command of our small striking force. His flagship, the light cruiser *De Ruyter*, was in the lead, followed by another Netherlands light cruiser, the *Java*. Next in line came the British heavy cruiser, *Exeter*, of Graf Spee fame, followed by the crippled *Houston*. Last in the line of cruisers was the Australian light cruiser *Perth*. Ten allied destroyers made up the remainder of our force. Slowly we steamed past the ruined docks where small groups of old men, women and children had assembled to wave tearful good-bys to their men who would not return.

Our force was small and hurriedly assembled. We had never worked together before, but now we had one common purpose which every man knew it was his duty to carry through. We were to do our utmost to break up an enemy task force that was bearing down on Java, even though it meant the loss of every ship and man among us. In us lay the last hope of the Netherlands East Indies.

All night long we searched for the enemy convoy but

they seemed to have vanished from previously reported positions. We were still at battle stations the next afternoon when at 1415 reports from air reconnaissance indicated that the enemy was south of Bawean Island, and heading south. The two forces were less than fifty miles apart. A hurried but deadly serious conference of officers followed in the wardroom. Commander Maher, our gunnery officer, explained that our mission was to sink or disperse the protecting enemy fleet units and then destroy the convoy. My heart pounded with excitement, for the battle later to be known as the Java Sea Battle was only a matter of minutes away. Were the sands of time running out for the *Houston* and all of us who manned her? At that moment I would have given my soul to know.

In the darkness of my room the Japs came again just as though I were standing on the bridge . . . a forest of masts rapidly developing into ships that climbed in increasing numbers over the horizon . . . those dead ahead, ten destroyers divided into two columns and each led by a four-stack light cruiser. Behind them and off our starboard bow came four light cruisers followed by two heavies.

The odds weigh heavily against us, for we are outnumbered and outgunned.

The Japs open fire first. Sheets of copper-colored flame lick out along their battle line and black smoke momentarily masks them from view. My heart pounds violently and cold sweat drenches my body as I realize that the first salvo is on its way. Somehow those big shells all seem aimed at me. I wonder why our guns don't open up, but as the Jap shells fall harmlessly a thousand yards short I realize

that the range is yet too great. The battle from which there will be no retreat has begun.

At twenty-eight thousand yards the *Exeter* opens fire, followed by the *Houston*. The sound of our guns bellowing defiance is terrific. The gun blast tears my steel helmet from my head and sends it rolling on the deck.

The range closes rapidly and soon all cruisers are in on the fight. Salvos of shells splash in the water ever closer to us. Now one falls close to starboard followed by another close to port. This is an ominous indicator that the Japs have at last found the range. We stand tensely awaiting the next salvo, and it comes with a wild screaming of shells that fall all around us. It's a straddle, but not a hit is registered. Four more salvos in succession straddle the *Houston*, and the lack of a hit gives us some confidence. The *Perth*, 900 yards astern of us, is straddled eight times in a row, yet she too steams on unscathed. Our luck is holding out.

Shells from our guns are observed bursting close to the last Jap heavy cruiser. We have her range, and suddenly one of our eight-inch bricks strikes home. There is an explosion aboard her. Black smoke and debris fly into the air and a fire breaks out forward of her bridge. We draw blood first as she turns out of the battle line, making dense smoke. Commander Maher, directing the fire of our guns from his station high in the foretop, reports our success to the captain over the phone. A lusty cheer goes up from the crew as the word spreads over the ship.

Three enemy cruisers are concentrating their fire on *Exeter*. We shift targets to give her relief, but it is not long after this that *Exeter* shells find their mark and a light cruiser turns out of the Jap line, smoking and on fire. De-



spite the loss of two cruisers the intensity of Jap fire does not seem to diminish. The *Houston* is hit twice. One shell rips through the bow just aft of the port-anchor windlass, passes down through several decks and out the side just above the water line without exploding. The other shell, hitting aft, barely grazes the side and ruptures a small oil tank. It, too, fails to explode.

Up to this point the luck of our forces has held up well, but now there is a rapid turn of events as the *Exeter* is hit by a Jap shell which does not explode, but rips into her forward fire room and severs a main steam line. This reduces her speed to seven knots. In an attempt to save the *Exeter*, whose loss of speed makes her an easy target, we all make smoke to cover her withdrawal. The Japs, aware that something has gone wrong, are quick to press home an advantage, and their destroyers, under heavy support fire from the cruisers, race in to deliver a torpedo attack.

The water seems alive with torpedoes. Lookouts report them approaching and Captain Rooks maneuvers the ship to present as small a target as possible. At this moment a Netherlands East Indies destroyer, the *Kortenaer*, trying to change stations, is hit amidships by a torpedo intended for the *Houston*. There is a violent explosion and a great fountain of water rises a hundred feet above her, obscuring all but small portions of her bow and stern. When the watery fountain settles back into the sea it becomes apparent that the little green and gray destroyer has broken in half and turned over. Only the bow and stern sections of her jackknifed keel stick above the water. A few men scramble desperately to her barnacled bottom, and her twin screws in their last propulsive effort turn slowly over in the

air. In less than two minutes she has disappeared beneath the sea. No one can stand by to give the few survivors a helping hand, for her fate can be ours at any instant.

It is nearing sundown. The surface of the sea is covered with clouds of black smoke, which makes it difficult to spot the enemy. It is discovered that Jap cruisers are closing in upon us, and our destroyers are ordered to attack with torpedoes in order to divert them and give us time to re-form. Although no hits are reported, the effect of the attack is gratifying, for the Japs turn away. At this point the engagement is broken off. The daylight battle has ended with no decisive results; however, there is still the convoy, which we will attempt to surprise under the cover of night.

We check our losses. The *Kortenaer* and H.M.S. *Electra* have been sunk. The crippled *Exeter* has retired to Surabaya, escorted by the American destroyers, who have expended their torpedoes and are running low on fuel. The *Houston*, *Perth*, *De Ruyter* and *Java* are still in the fight, but showing the jarring effects of continuous gunfire. Only two destroyers remain with us, H.M.S. *Jupiter* and H.M.S. *Encounter*.

The *Houston* had fired 303 rounds of ammunition per turret, and only fifty rounds per gun remain. The loss of number-three turret has been a great handicap, but there are no complaints, for the *Houston* has done well. The chief engineer reports that his force is on the verge of complete exhaustion and that there have been more than seventy cases of heat exhaustion in the fire rooms during the afternoon's battle. We are in poor fighting condition, but there is plenty more to be done.

During the semidarkness of twilight, we steam on a

course away from the enemy in order to lead any of their units which might have us under observation into believing that we are in retreat. When darkness descends we turn and head back.

Shortly after this H.M.S. *Jupiter*, covering our port flank, explodes mysteriously and vanishes in a brief but brilliant burst of flame. We are dumfounded, for the enemy is not to be seen, yet we race on puzzling over her fate and blindly seeking the transports.

An hour passes with nothing intervening to interrupt our search, and then high in the sky above us a flare bursts, shattering the darkness. Night has suddenly become day and we are illuminated like targets in a shooting gallery. We are helpless to defend ourselves, for we have no such thing as radar, and the plane merely circles outside our range of vision to drop another flare after the first one burns itself out, following it with another and still another.

We cannot know for sure, but certainly it is logical to assume that the enemy is closing in for the kill. Blinded by the flares we wait through tense minutes for the blow to come.

On the ship men speak in hushed tones as though their very words will give our position away to the enemy. Only the rush of water as our bow knifes through the sea at thirty knots, and the continuous roaring of blowers from the vicinity of the quarter-deck, are audible. Death stands by, ready to strike. No one talks of it although all thoughts dwell on it.

The fourth flare bursts, burns and then slowly falls into the sea. We are enveloped in darkness again. No attack has come, and as time passes it becomes evident that the

plane has gone away. How wonderful is the darkness, yet how terrifying to realize that the enemy is aware of our every move and merely biding his time like a cat playing with a mouse!

The moon has come up to assist in our search for the convoy. It has been almost an hour since the last flare, and nothing has happened to indicate that the enemy has us under observation. During this period Ensign Stivers has relieved me as officer of the deck. I climb up on the forward antiaircraft director platform and sprawl out to catch a bit of rest before the inevitable shooting begins. I hardly close my eyes before there comes the sound of whistles and shouting men. I am back on my feet in a hurry and look over the side. The water is dotted with groups of men yelling in some strange tongue which I cannot understand. H.M.S. *Encounter* is ordered to remain behind to rescue them.

Now we are four—three light cruisers and one heavy. We plow on through the eerie darkness. Suddenly out of nowhere six flares appear in the water along our line of ships. They resemble those round smoke pots that burn alongside road constructions with a yellow flame. What exactly are they, and how did they get there? Are they some form of mine, or is their purpose to mark our path for the enemy? No one dares to guess. Either eventuality is bad enough.

As fast as we leave one group astern, another group bobs up alongside. We cannot account for them, and this Oriental devilry is as bewildering as it is confusing. None of us has ever seen such a phenomenon before. We continue to move away from them, but other groups of floating flares appear.



The uncertainty of what is to follow is nerve-racking. We look back and there, marking our track on the oily surface of the sea, are zigzag lines of flares which rock and burn like ghoulish jack-o'-lanterns. We leave them on the far horizon and no more appear. We are again in welcome darkness.

At approximately 2230, lookouts report two large unidentified ships to port, range 12,000 yards. There are no friendly ships within hundreds of miles of us, therefore these are the enemy. The *Houston* opens up with two main battery salvos, the results of which are not determined, and the Japs reply with two of their own which throw water over the forecastle. With this exchange of fire the Japs disappear in the darkness and we make no effort to chase them, for we need all of our ammunition to sink transports.

There is no relaxing now. We are in the area where anything can happen. Hundreds of eyes peer into the night seeking the convoy, as we realize that the end of our mission is approaching.

During the night the order of ships in column has been shifted. The *De Ruyter* still maintains the lead, but behind her comes the *Houston*, followed by the *Java* and *Perth* in that order.

A half hour passes without incident, and then with the swiftness of a lightning bolt a tremendous explosion rocks the *Java* 900 yards astern of the *Houston*. Mounting flames envelop her amidships and spread rapidly aft. She loses speed and drops out of the column to lie dead in the water where sheets of uncontrolled flame consume her.

Torpedo wakes are observed in the water, although we can find no enemy to fight back. The *De Ruyter* changes

course sharply to the right, and the *Houston* is just about to follow when an explosion similar to the one that doomed the *Java* is heard aboard the *De Ruyter*. Crackling flames shoot high above her bridge, quickly enveloping the entire ship.

Captain Rooks, in a masterpiece of seamanship and quick thinking, maneuvers the *Houston* to avoid torpedoes that slip past us ten feet on either side. Then, joined by the *Perth*, we race away from the stricken ships and the insidious enemy that no one can see. How horrible it is to leave our allies! But we are powerless to assist them. Now that Admiral Doorman has gone down with his blazing flagship, the captain of the *Perth* takes command, for he is senior to Captain Rooks, and we follow the *Perth* as he sets a course for Batavia.

What an infernal night, and how lucky we are to escape! It seems almost miraculous when the sun comes up on the next morning, February 28, for there have been many times during the past fifteen hours when I would have sworn we would never see it.

The *Houston* was a wreck. Concussions from the eight-inch guns had played merry hell with the ship's interior. Every desk on the ship had its drawers torn out and the contents spewed over the deck. In lockers, clothes were torn from their hangers and pitched in muddled heaps. Pictures, radios, books and everything of a like nature were jolted from their normal places and dashed on the deck.

The admiral's cabin was a deplorable sight. At one time it had been President Roosevelt's cabin, but no one could have recognized it now as such. Clocks lay broken on the

deck, furniture was overturned, mirrors were cracked, charts were ripped from the bulkhead, and large pieces of soundproofing that had come loose from the bulkheads and overhead were thick in the rubble on the deck.

The ship itself had suffered considerably. Plates already weakened by near hits in previous bombing attacks were now badly sprung and leaking. The glass windows on the bridge were shattered. Fire hose strung along the passageways was leaking and minor floods made it sloppy underfoot.

The *Houston* was wounded and practically out of ammunition, but there was still fight left in her, plenty of it.

These events accompanied by many others played on my mind in the minutest detail, until at last my senses became numb and I relaxed in sleep.

It was nearly 2400 when, *clang! clang! clang! clang!*, the nerve-shattering "General Alarm" burst through my wonderful cocoon of sleep and brought me upright on both feet. Through two and a half months of war that gong calling all hands to battle stations had rung in deadly earnest. It meant only one thing, "Danger"—man your battle station and get ready to fight. So thoroughly had the lessons of war been taught us to the sharp, heartless clanging of that gong that I found myself in my shoes before I was even awake.

*Clang! Clang! Clang! Clang!* The sound echoed along the steel bulkheads of the ship's deserted interior. I wondered what kind of devilry we were mixed up in now, and somehow I felt depressed. I grabbed my tin hat as I left the room and was putting it on my head when a salvo from the main battery roared out overhead, knocking me against

the bulkhead. We were desperately short of those eight-inch bricks and I knew that the boys weren't wasting them on mirages. I flashed my light to assist me in passing through the deserted wardroom and into the passageway at the other end, where a group of stretcher-bearers and corpsmen were assembled. I asked them but they didn't seem to know what we had run into. I left them and climbed the ladder leading to the bridge.

As I climbed there was more firing from the main battery, and now the five-inch guns were taking up the argument. I realized that it was getting to be one hell of a battle and I started running. On the Communication deck where the one-point-one's were getting into action, I passed their gun crews working swiftly, mechanically in the darkness without a hitch, as their guns pumped out shell after shell. Momentarily I caught a glimpse of tracers hustling out into the night. They were beautiful.

Before I reached the bridge every gun on the ship was in action. The noise they made was magnificent. The *Houston* was throwing knockout punches. How reassuring it was to hear, at measured intervals, the blinding crash of the main battery, the sharp rapid crack of the five-inch guns, the steady methodic pom, pom, pom, pom, of the one-point-one's! And above all that, from their platforms high in the foremast and in the mainmast, came the continuous sweeping volleys of fifty-caliber machine guns which had been put there as antiaircraft weapons, but which now suddenly found themselves engaging enemy surface targets.

As I stepped on the bridge the *Houston* became enveloped in the blinding glare of searchlights. Behind the lights I could barely discern the outlines of Jap destroyers. They



had come in close to illuminate for their heavy units which fired at us from the darkness. Battling desperately for existence the *Houston's* guns trained on the lights, and as fast as they were turned on, just as fast were blasted out.

Although the bridge was the *Houston's* nerve center, I was unable to find out what we were up against. This was mainly because the tempo of the battle was so great and every man stationed there so vitally concerned with his immediate duty that I was reluctant to butt in at such a time and ask a question that had little relative meaning. What we had actually run into was later estimated to be sixty fully loaded transports, twenty destroyers, and six cruisers. We were in the middle of this mass of ships before either side was aware of the other's presence.

Suddenly surrounded by ships, the *Perth* and *Houston* immediately opened fire and turned sharply to starboard in an effort to break free. However, the fury of the Japs was not to be denied, and the *Perth* was mortally wounded by torpedoes. Lying dead in the water she continued to fire with everything she had until Jap shells blasted her to bits and she sank.

When Captain Rooks realized that the *Perth* was finished he turned the *Houston* back into the heart of the Jap convoy, determined in the face of no escape to sell the *Houston* dearly.

At close range the *Houston* pounded the Jap transports with everything she had, and at the same time fought off the destroyers that were attacking with torpedoes and shell-fire. Jap cruisers remained in the background throwing salvo after salvo aboard and around us. The *Houston* was taking terrible punishment. A torpedo penetrated our after

engine room, where it exploded, killing every man there and reducing our speed to fifteen knots.

Thick smoke and hot steam venting on the gun deck from the after engine room temporarily drove men from their guns, but they came back and stayed there in spite of it. Power went out of the shell hoists, which stopped the flow of five-inch shells to the guns from the almost empty magazines. Men attempted to go below and bring shells up by hand, but debris and fires from numerous hits blocked their way. In spite of this they continued to fire, using star shells which were stowed in the ready ammunition boxes by the guns.

Number-two turret, smashed by a direct hit, blew up, sending wild flames flashing up over the bridge. The heat, so intense that it drove everything out of the conning tower, temporarily disrupted communications to other parts of the ship. The fire was soon extinguished, but when the sprinklers flooded the magazine our last remaining supply of eight-inch ammunition was ruined, which meant that the *Houston* was now without a main battery.

Numerous fires were breaking out all over the ship and it became increasingly difficult for the men to cope with them. Another torpedo plowed into the *Houston* somewhere forward of the quarter-deck. The force of the explosion made the ship tremble beneath us, and I realized then that we were done for.

Slowly we listed to starboard as the grand old ship gradually lost steerageway and stopped. The few guns still in commission continued to fire, although it was obvious that the end was near. It must have torn at the captain's heart,

but his voice was strong as he summoned the bugler and ordered him to sound "Abandon Ship."

When I heard the words "Abandon Ship" I did not wait to go down the ladder which already had a capacity crowd, with men waiting; instead I jumped over the railing to the deck below. That was probably a fortunate move, for just as I jumped a shell burst on the bridge, killing several men. I trotted out on the port catapult tower where the battered and unflyable hulk of our last airplane spread its useless wings in the darkness. It contained a rubber boat and a bottle of brandy, both of which I figured would come in handy, but I was not alone in this, for five people were there ahead of me.

Despite the fact that we were still the target for continuous shells and the ship was slowly sinking beneath us, there was no confusion. Men went quietly and quickly about the job of abandoning ship. Fear was nowhere apparent, due possibly to the fact that the one thing we feared most throughout the short space of the war had happened.

Captain Rooks had come down off the bridge and was saying good-by to several of his officers and men outside his cabin, when a Jap shell exploded in a one-point-one gun mount, sending a piece of the breech crashing into his chest. Captain Rooks, beloved by officers and men, died in their arms.

When Buda, the captain's Chinese cook, learned that the captain had been killed, he refused to leave the ship. He simply sat cross-legged outside the captain's cabin, rocking back and forth and moaning, "Captain dead, *Houston* dead, Buda die too." He went down with the ship.

During this time I made my way to the quarter-deck. Dead men lay sprawled on the deck, but there was no time to find out who they were. Men from my division were busily engaged in the starboard hangar in an effort to bring out a seaplane pontoon and two wing-tip floats that we had filled with food and water in preparation for just such a time. If we could get them into the water and assemble them as we had so designed, they would make a fine floating structure around which we could gather and from which we could work.

I hurried to the base of the catapult tower where I worked rapidly to release the life lines in order that we might get the floats over the side and into the water. I uncoupled one line and was working on the second when a torpedo struck directly below us. I heard no explosion, but the deck buckled and jumped under me and I found myself suddenly engulfed in a deluge of fuel oil and salt water.

Up until that moment I must have been too fascinated with the unreality of the situation to think truly about it and become frightened, but when this sudden torrent of fuel oil and water poured over me, all I could think of was fire. It was the most helpless sensation I ever had experienced in my life. Somehow I hadn't figured on getting hit or killed, but now I was gripped with the sudden fear of blazing fuel oil on my person and covering the surface of the sea. I was panicked, for I could figure no escape from it. The same thought must have been in the minds of others, for we all raced from the starboard side to the shelter of the port hangar. No sooner had we cleared the quarter-deck than a salvo of shells plowed through it, exploding deep below decks.



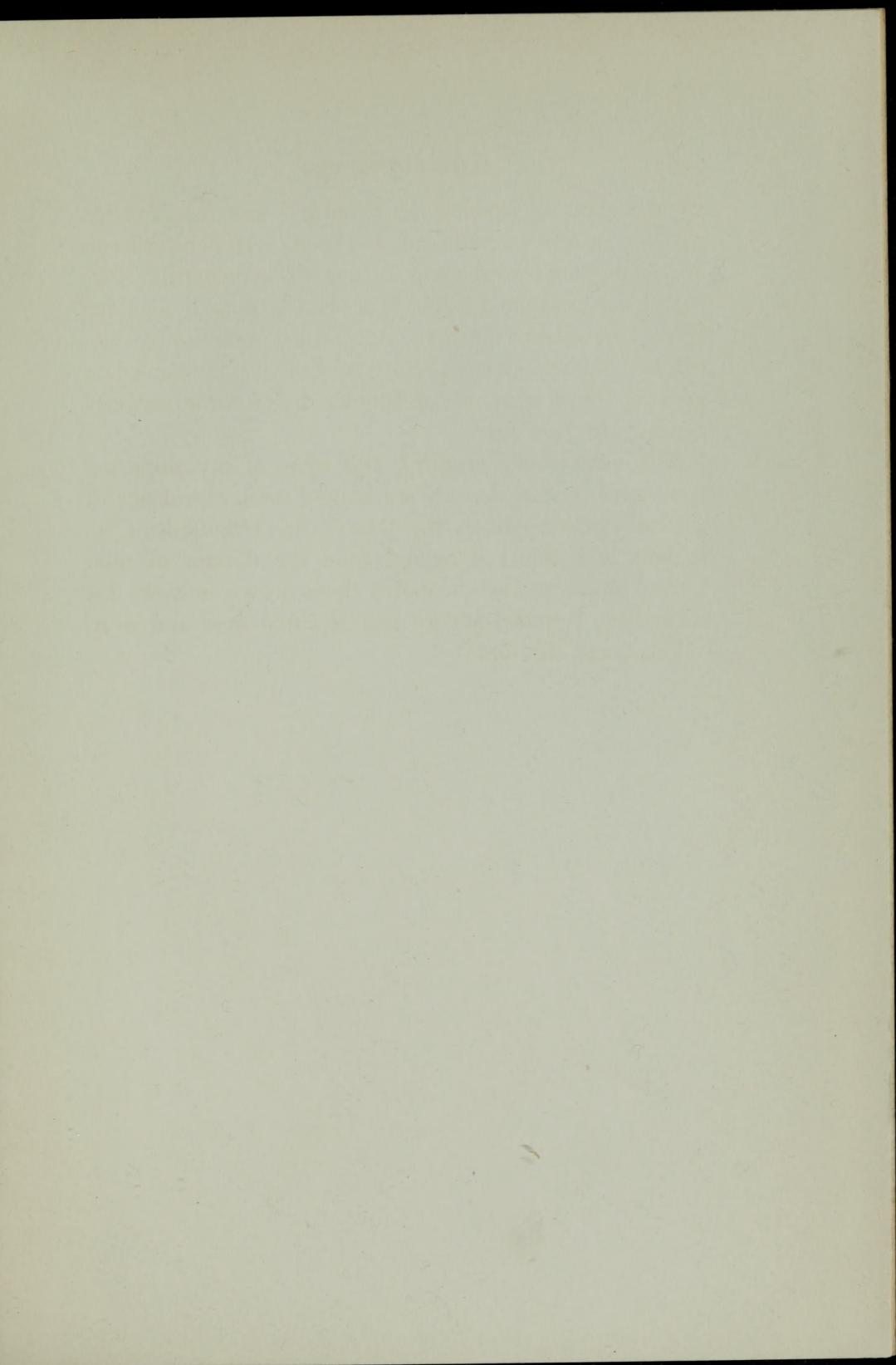
Events were moving fast, and the *Houston* in her death throes was about to go down. There was only one idea left in my mind, and that was to join the others who were going over the side in increasing numbers. Quickly I made my way to the portside and climbed down the cargo nets that were hanging there. When I reached the water's edge I dropped off into the warm Java Sea. When my head came above the surface I was aware that in the darkness I was surrounded by many men, all swimming for their lives. Frantic screams for help from the wounded and drowning mixed with the shouts of others attempting to make contact with shipmates. The sea was an oily battleground of men pitted against the terrors of death. Desperately I swam to get beyond reach of the sinking ship's suction. As much as I loved the *Houston* I had no desire to join her in a watery grave.

A few hundred yards away I turned, gasping for breath, to watch the death of my ship. She lay well over to starboard. Jap destroyers had come in close and illuminated her with searchlights as they raked her decks with machine-gun fire. Many men struggled in the water near the ship, others clung desperately to heavily loaded life rafts, and then to my horror I realized that the Japs were coldly and deliberately firing on the men in the water. The concussions of shells bursting in the midst of swimming men sent shock waves through the water that slammed against my body with an evil force, making me wince with pain. Men closer to the exploding shells were killed by this concussion alone.

Dazed, unable to believe that all this was real, I floated there, watching as though bewitched. The end had come.

By the glare of Japanese searchlights I saw the *Houston* roll slowly over to starboard, and then, with her yardarms almost dipping into the sea, she paused momentarily. Perhaps I only imagined it, but it seemed as though a sudden breeze picked up the Stars and Stripes still firmly two-blocked on the mainmast, and waved the flag in one defiant gesture. Then with a tired shudder the *Houston* vanished beneath the Java Sea.

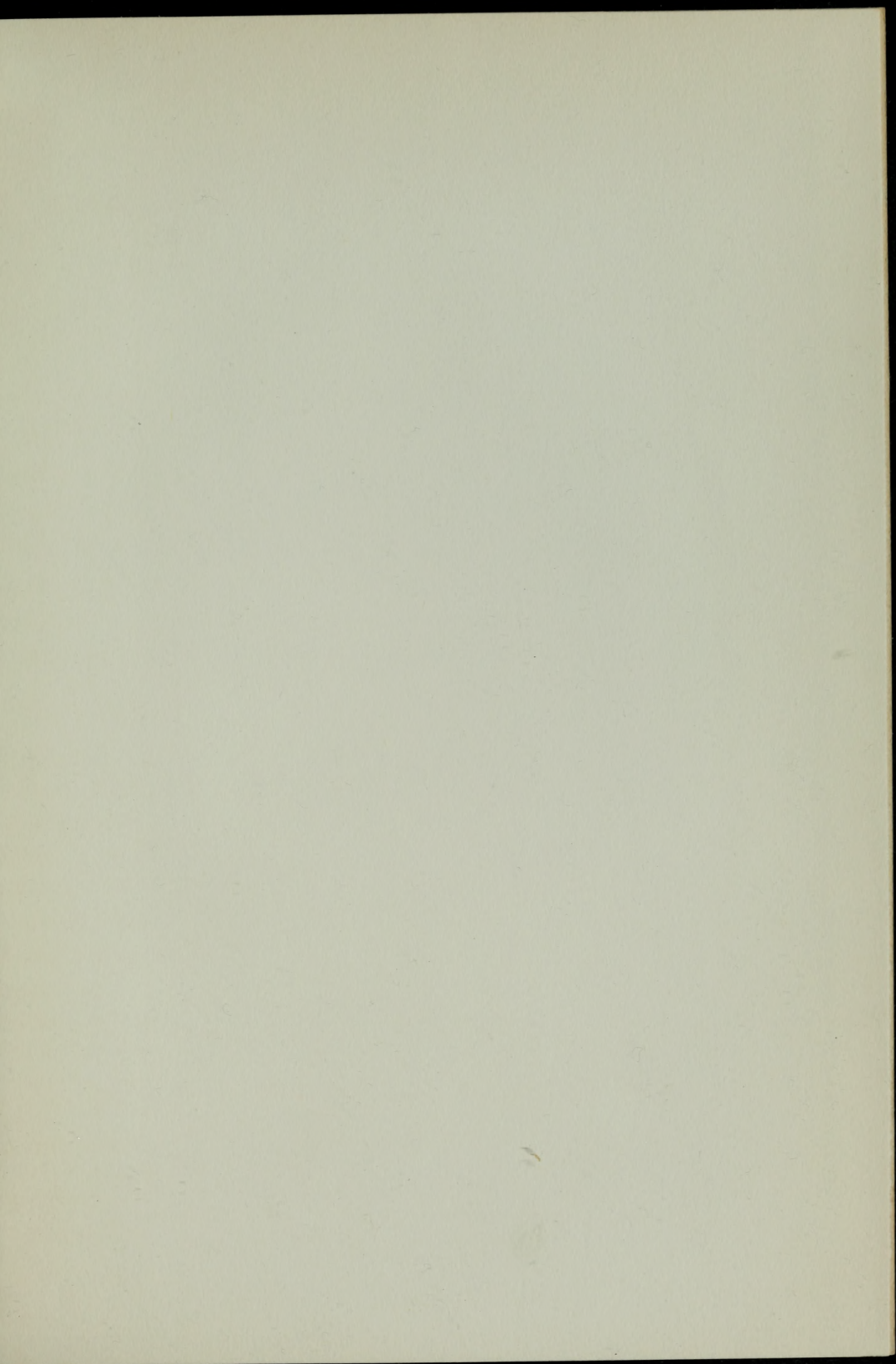
The magnificent *Houston* and most of my shipmates were gone, but in the oily sea around me lay evidence of the carnage wrought by their last battle. Hundreds of Jap soldiers and sailors struggled amid the flotsam of their sunken ships; and as I watched them drown or swim for their lives, I smiled grimly and repeated over and over, "Well done, *Houston!*"

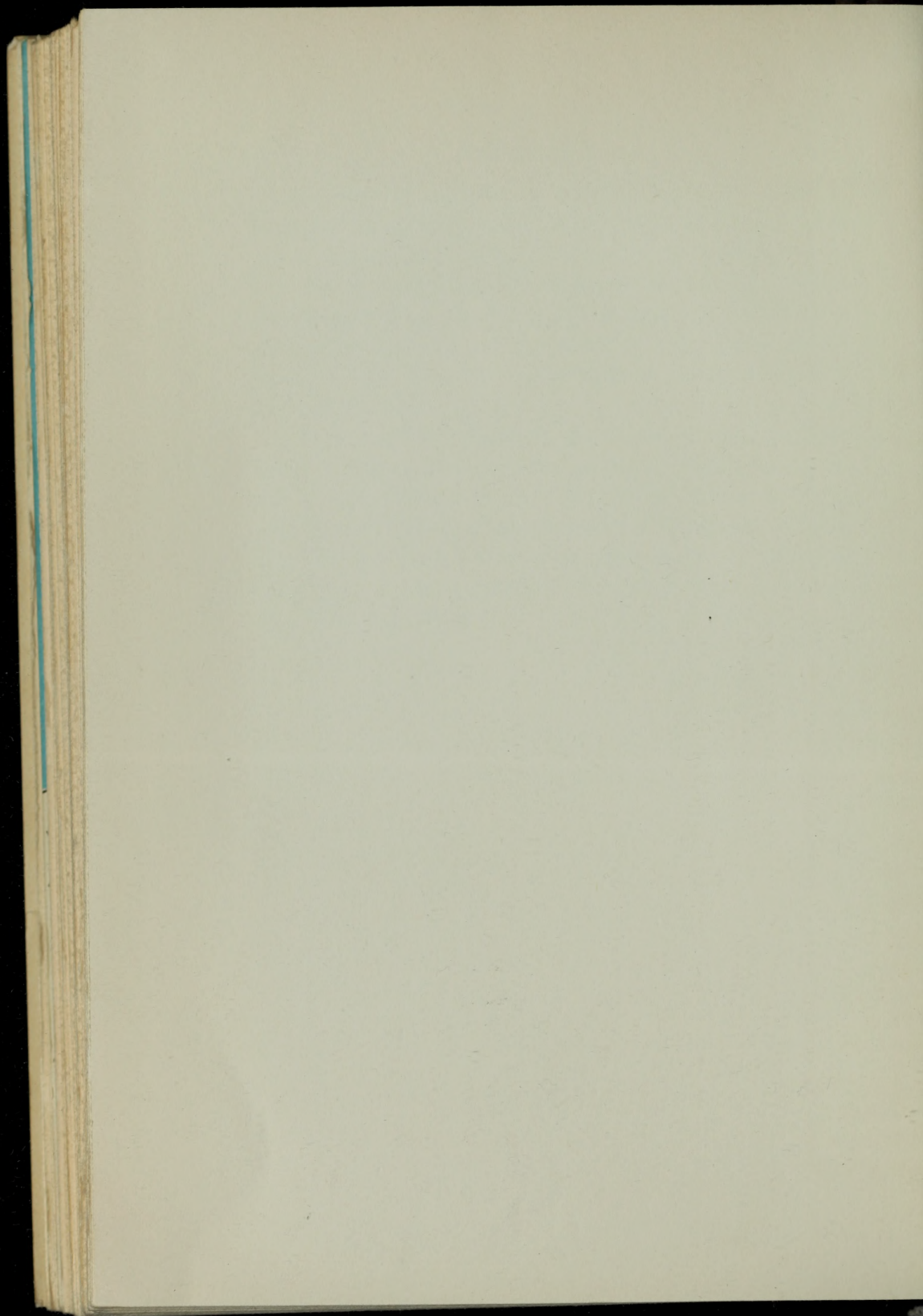


THE HISTORY OF THE

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OF THE SOCIETY OF THE APOSTOLICAL CHURCH  
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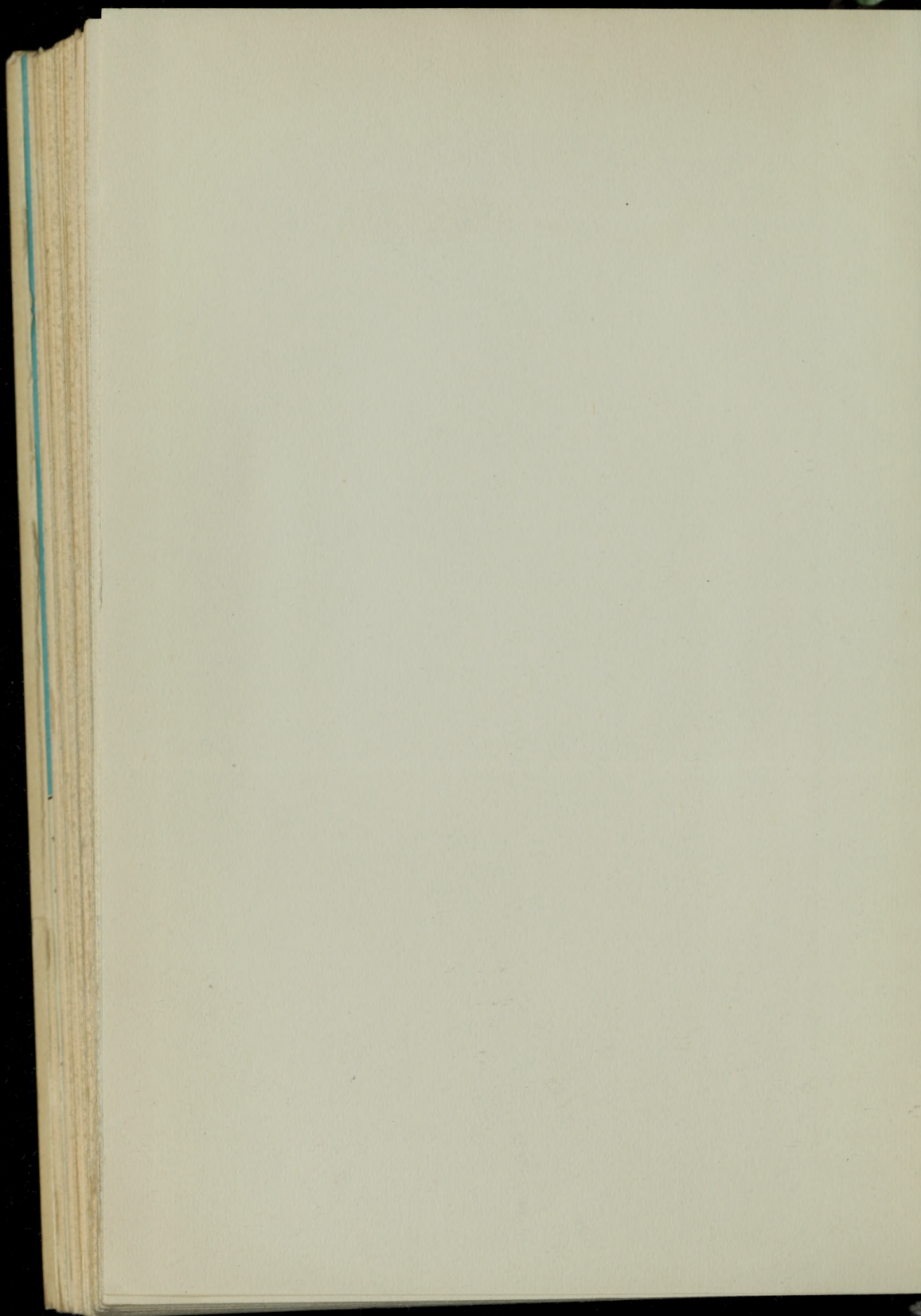
















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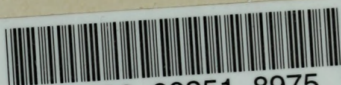
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